Rhetorical tropes from the black English oral tradition in the works of Toni Morrison

Yvonne Kay Atkinson

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RHETORICAL TROPES FROM THE BLACK ENGLISH ORAL TRADITION IN 
THE WORKS OF TONI MORRISON

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition

by
Yvonne Kay Atkinson
December 1995
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December 1995
Approved by:

Philip Page, Chair, English

Rong Chen

Susan Meisenhelder

Date 11/9/95
Thank you Phil Page, mentor, friend, and person most likely to argue against my point.

Thank you Sally Anne Josephson and Claudia Basha.

Undeniable thanks to the husband, Donald and the family.
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Abstract

Within Black English there are forms, styles and rhetoric that are uniquely African American. Tracing the evolution and development of Black English demonstrates the survival traits of concealment and the inclusiveness that are major parts of the Black English oral tradition. The combination of the survival traits, form, style and rhetoric of the Black English oral tradition is the essence of African American written discourse.

African American authors have employed a form of code switching that enables them to incorporate the oral tradition in their written discourse. Code switching refers to the alternating use of two different languages in a discourse. I argue that in African American Literature, code switching has evolved into a sophisticated system of not only the alternation of different languages but also the masking of one language by another. The African American author may be writing in common English, but the meaning and the connotations are derived from the Black English oral tradition.

My hypothesis is that the oral tradition evident in African American Literature can be demonstrated through the rhetorical tropes of, Call/Response. Witness/Testify, and Signifying. An example of the power, purpose, and style of these tropes is demonstrated in the opening line of Toni
Morrison's *Jazz*: "Sth, I know that woman." When this line is examined from the perspective of the African American rhetorical tradition of Black English the tone of the novel is established. The "Sth" is a form of Call/Response. It is designed to elicit a response from the hearer/reader. The "Sth" is a slightly derogatory expression that in nature says, I know something that you don't know, and I really don't feel you should be included, but I'll tell you anyway. After reading just these three letters the reader knows that the narrator is about to dish-some-dirt on "that woman." The reader also knows that the information that is being imparted is not necessarily fact, rather it is what the narrator has gleaned from her vantage point. The informed reader knows from the opening line that the narrator is not reliable, but not malicious. She is a Trickster and her commentary is a system designed to decipher and understand a situation. While this opening line establishes the narrator's present in the novel as one of the characters of the novel it also signals to the reader that active, interactive communication between the text and the reader is needed for meaning to develop.

When African American Literature is viewed through the lens of the Black English oral tradition, the rich expressive culture of African Americans articulates the essence of the work. The text becomes an eloquent
transition between the oral tradition and the written discourse of African Americans.
Introduction

*I went to the crossroad*
*fell down on my knees.*

Robert Johnson

America is at a crossroad, a changing point in our existence. The boundary lines of the past are being erased and new territories are being defined and redefined. There was a time when there was a firm mark of delineation between Black and White, but now some sections of the boundary are blurring while others are being reinforced. The juxtaposition of Black and White America has traditionally been seen in opposition, but a change has come. Now questions are being raised not only about what is Black and what is White, but also about who is Black and who is White. These are not questions that can, or will, be easily answered. But the fact that the questions are being asked is an indication of the changes that are taking place now and an indication of the changes that will occur in the future.

Change creates tension, and tension creates an atmosphere of possibilities. This is an opportunity to look closely at our past and to use this information to steer the direction in which we go. This is an occasion to open ourselves to one another and a way to anchor our existence. African Americans and White Americans have lived on the same continent, in the same country, the same state, city, town, and neighborhood for years, but still we
do not know one another. Barriers have been erected by both sides that have limited our communication.

We have used these barriers as a means to shield ourselves because of fear, guilt and mistrust. White Americans have feared African Americans because one fears the unknown, and African Americans have feared Whites Americans because of the history of death and destruction inflicted on African Americans by Whites. African Americans feel guilt and shame because they were slaves and White Americans feel guilt and shame because they were the enslavers. This fear has set up an atmosphere of mistrust in which it has been easier for each group to separate itself than for the two to come together in a meaningful dialogue.

The time is ripe for a dialogue, but there is a fundamental obstacle in the way: language. African Americans, because of their historical oppression in America, have learned to be bi-dialectic. White Americans, on the other hand, are not, for the most part, aware that African Americans speak another language that has its own rules of grammar, pronunciation, words, and meanings, a language that shapes and defines who they are and their place in the world. This language of African America has its own traditional rituals, codes of conduct, and pedagogy. One of the key ingredients for a successful dialogue is, ideally, for the parties involved to be
speaking the same language, but if they do not it is important for all parties to realize and respect that they are from different cultures and therefore will have different interpretation of language and its uses, modes, and discourse.

The oral traditions of Africa, the tensions between an oral culture and a literate culture, the brutality of slavery, isolation, a continuous influx of African languages and culture, and a shared fundamental world view are the elements that shaped Black English. These same types of social forces have been key ingredients in the transition of rhetoric from Black English into written communication.

1. As Gwendolyn Brooks answered when asked why she capitalized the "B" in Black, "I capitalize my name." White is the name that I am using for non-African Americans of European decent.

2. James Sledd, uses the term bi-dialectalism to describe the two-language system that African Americans use.
Most African Americans speak Black English and the language of White America. One of the characteristic aspects of African American culture is the oral tradition of Black English. According to Geneva Smitherman, oral tradition is defined as

...stories, old sayings, songs, jokes, proverbs, and other cultural products that have not been written down or recorded. The forms of Oral Tradition cultures are kept alive by being passed down by word of mouth from one generation to the next. The forms reveal the values and beliefs of the people, the things they hold to be true, and lessons about life and how to live it. (Black 30).

Paradoxically the very thing that is the foundation of the oral tradition, word of mouth, is the same thing that hinders the dialogue between African Americans and White Americans.

There are a number of problems that hamper discussions between Black and White Americans. White Americans, because they are not directly involved in the word of mouth exchange, are not aware of the values and beliefs of the people who use Black English. Many White Americans value writing to the point of ignoring or not acknowledging any other discourse. Another issue caused by the oral
tradition is that its very orality makes it an unconscious language. Unlike Common English, there are few text books, and fewer classes on Black English. There are few lexicographical studies, no orthography, and no curriculum for acquisition or analysis of Black English. The instruction of Black English is focused and taught, but not in a traditional didactic way. Instead there is an ambiguity that is almost an unconscious consciousness about the process. The teacher/parent does not sit the child down and say "We talk this way because... and they [White Americans] talk that way..." Rather the child learns by example, and there is rarely an opportunity or situation that causes the child/learner or the teacher/parent to examine the why or how of Black English or its acquisition. Not until recently has there been an academic setting where Black English was examined, criticized and taught.

The oral tradition of Black English is also hidden because Black English speakers code switch. Code switching refers to the alternating use of two different languages in a discourse. Robbins Burling refers to code switching as a "continuum of styles" (251). When speaking to someone outside of the African American community, most African Americans will code switch: they will speak the language of White America, Common English. Those who are unaware of code switching, Black English, and/or the oral tradition, will not get all of the meaning of the conversation. And
the person(s) who is code switching may also be unaware
that he/she is speaking two different languages. Burling
says, "Consciously or unconsciously, many Negroes learn to
slide back and forth along the continuum of styles. . . ." (251).
But, while the African American who is code
switching is using the language of White America, the
meanings and nuance will be those of the Black English oral
tradition.

For African Americans, Common English words can have
two or more levels of meaning. For example, the word bad,
as Geneva Smitherman, points out, has different meanings.
In Common English the word suggests negativity, and in
Black English it can be both negative and positive. "I
have a bad cold' means the same thing to both blacks and
whites, but 'He is a bad dude' will suggest to whites the
idea of an undesirable character, whereas to blacks it
would indicate a highly desirable person" (Talkin 59).

Along with the layered meaning of words and code
switching, there is what I call Masking, the concealing or
screening of one language system by another. An African
American may be speaking/writing in the language of White
America, but the underlying meaning of the discourse is
from the Black English oral tradition. Masking is a
language contained within another language. Concealment or
screening is historically part of the African American
culture. Black English is a language of concealment:
meaning is concealed through indirection and layering. The language itself is concealed through a tradition that does not allow "outsiders" into the language system. The acquisition of Black English is also a form of concealment because there is so much ambiguity surrounding it. Masking could be called the ultimate concealment.

The rhetoric of Black English sets up delineations, markers that identify who is in the group/community and who is other. During the time of slavery, and still today in African American culture, group identification is all important. Group identification is simply the concept of African Americans seeking their identity and defining themselves through communal bonding. Identification of group is the basis of the rhetorical tropes in Black English. Masking, while a way for the oral tradition to survive in written discourse, is also used to identify group from other. Masking is not identified in the written text, nor is it explained to the reader.

An example of Masking is a speech given by Malcolm X: "Mr. Moderator, Brother Lomax, brothers and sisters, friends and enemies: I just can't believe everyone in here is a friend and I don't want to leave anyone out" (qtd. in Taikin 98). Geneva Smitherman's analysis of this statement is,

Not only is Malcolm neatly putting down his enemies in the audience without a frontal attack, he is also sending a hidden message (to those hip
enough to dig it). Since it is an all-black audience, Malcolm is slyly alluding to the all-too-familiar historical and contemporary pattern of blacks betrayed by other blacks; traitors in their midst who ran and told the white folks everything they knew (98).

Smitherman is correct, but she does not take the analysis far enough. Malcolm X is Masking: using Common English, structure, style, syntax, and phonemes to convey Black English rhetorical tropes. He is speaking in Common English, but he is concealing traditional meanings from the Black English oral tradition within his messege. Malcolm X begins his speech with a roll call which, in the Black English oral tradition, signals to the audience that an important message is about to be delivered. It also signals that the message will be delivered in the style of the Black English oral tradition. This style of roll call before an important proclamation is part of the oral tradition that is taught in African American churches. He is setting his audience up for the Signification of his statement. The circumlocutory, indirect rhetoric of Malcolm X's speech is the rhetorical trope of Signifying taken from the oral tradition of Black English.

Malcolm X is also using Call/Response and Witness/Testify, rhetorical tropes from Black English, to engage his audience. He Calls on his audience to Respond by using a style traditionally used in African American churches. He is Calling on communal and historical
knowledge and memories to establish the tone and style of his speech. The rhetoric of Call/Response makes the audience a Witness to his Testimony of past and present duplicity within the African American community. Malcolm X layers the intent and definition of his speech by using the indirect meanings implied by Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify.

He also reminds the audience that he is like them, and he establishes group and other by including the audience in the use of Signifying, Call/Response and Witness/Testifying. Malcolm X's establishment of other is more complicated than just a racial other. He establishes the obvious otherness of Black and White, while also establishing psychological otherness within the African American community by using methods and systems of the oral tradition of Black English.

Layered meanings, Code switching, Masking, and tropes from the Black English oral tradition are also an important part of the written discourse of African Americans. African Americans usually write in Common English, but they are using Common English to Mask the Black English meaning that underlies the text. By using Code Switching, Masking and the rhetorical tropes from Black English, African American authors have kept their oral traditions alive within written discourse. The voice and visual styling of the oral tradition that has been used to shape and claim a
culture has been enclosed within a medium that paradoxically appears to be its opposition. Code Switching, Masking and the rhetorical tropes from Black English are communal and individual expressive modes that mirror the African American cultural norms. Just as Black English is a blending of African and American languages, Masking and the rhetoric of Black English is a further synthesis, a blurring of African and American discourses.

For this discussion I am interested in modes of discourse, particularly three rhetorical tropes from the Black English oral tradition, that are present in the written discourse of African Americans:

These tropes are audience specific. For them to be effectively persuasive, the audience must have knowledge of Black English, historical and cultural references and the oral tradition. Black English rhetoric is grounded in conversational discourse from the oral tradition.

According to James L. Golden,

A major purpose in a rhetorical situation is to enable the participants through the means of dialogue to go beyond sensory experiences of the observable physical world and glimpse those universals that adhere to an ideal form. This movement from particulars to universal, or from the concrete to the abstract, gives us a "vision of the truth" by setting into motion a recollection process involving the stimulation of our memory" (21).

The rhetorical tropes of Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testifying "enable the participants through the means of dialogue to go beyond sensory experiences of the
observable physical world and glimpse those universals that adhere to an ideal form" (21). They are directly connected to the Black English oral tradition of self validation through communal interaction, and they encompass the traditional African world view.

These rhetorical tropes are embedded in the oral tradition and are the result of the evolution of Black English from the oral tradition to the literate tradition. This transition from the oral to the literate is one of the most significant blurrings of boundaries between African Americans and White Americans and may be the foundation from which a meaningful dialogue between African Americans and White America can begin. But before there can be a dialogue there must first be an understanding of the language system of Black English and then an understanding of the rhetorical tropes taken from Black English. African Americans and White Americans must begin to understand the history that has shaped Black English and thereby begin an understanding of each other.

James Sledd writes, "Linguistic change is the effect and not the cause of social change" (25). Today there is increased access to communication and education for African Americans, and the boundaries that held African Americans in limited areas are breaking down. But African Americans have not abandoned the Black English oral tradition. According to Michael D. Linn, "BE [Black English] cannot be
expected to lose its individuality until there is an amalgamation of blacks and whites into a general American culture" and "When the communication needs to change, then the language changes to meet these needs" (131).

The Black English oral tradition is incorporated into the linguistic changes that are taking place in African American culture. According to Geneva Smitherman, Black English is defined as "an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression and life in America. Black Language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture" (Talkin 2). Scholars have studied the semantics, sound, structure, and style of Black English, but they have primarily investigated Black English as an oral language. One of the changes that is taking place in America is a shift to an almost totally literate culture. Black English is a language of survival. In order to survive it has adapted and now is the underlying framework for the written discourse of African Americans.

To understand the evolution of Black English, one must look at the history of the language and the people who speak it. Traditionally it had been thought that because Africans brought to America as slaves were from different tribes, had different customs, and different languages, a communication barrier was created that prohibited slaves
from speaking, teaching, and hearing their African language, and therefore the languages of Africa were forgotten and died out. In reality, the languages and customs of the West Africans who were forced into slavery were not so dissimilar that there were no elements of correlation.

Charles Merlo found connections in the languages of West Africans: "all Negro African languages have a class of words reserved for human beings" (177). He also found common semantic idioms and connections in the syntactic characteristics of the African slaves' languages (177). Merlo discovered that West African languages stem from four major African language stocks that share linguistic characteristics (177). The significance of Merlo's research is that it exposes the fallacies of the popular theory that slavery created a "Tower of Babel" effect. Africans brought to America as slaves had a shared foundation of language and language systems which has evolved into the language system used by most African Americans.

In the past scholars who studied Black English failed to take into account the culture and traditions of Africa, which had its own traditions, norms, history and commerce. Not just a wild, jungle infested continent, Africa was the home of numerous civilizations and the cradle of humanity. Scholarly investigations of Africa and its people did not
take into consideration that the place the slaves came from was older than European civilizations. They did not take into consideration that the captured people were hunters, healers, farmers, griots, parents, children, loved ones, teachers, enemies, scientists, philosophers, peacemakers and warriors. They did not take into consideration that these slaves were people, and so they missed some of the details, some of the clues.

Another aspect of the issue of African language and slavery that has not been addressed is the Middle Passage. Most studies of Black English begin with the slaves in America, some begin in Africa, and few, if any, address the period when the Africans journeyed to America. These captives were literally packed together for the Middle Passage from Africa to America. It has been estimated by historians that one in every five slaves died during the Middle Passage. It is feasible to assume that these captives participated in verbal interaction while chained in the dark hole of the slave ships. There are no written records that prove this thesis, and, as far as I can ascertain, there are no oral stories of the Middle Passage that have survived, but, when people are faced with intolerable situations and traumatic stress, the tendency is for the oppressed to unite against their oppressors. One of the fundamental aspects of unity is communication.

The Middle Passage, because of its brutality and
length was fertile ground for the exchange and interaction of language between the captive Africans. Consequently, before the Africans landed in America, they had probably already developed the rudiments of a pidgin language. The pidgin that was developed in the holds of slave ships is important, but I am more interested in the fact that a system of communication was established. This may have laid the foundation for the adaptation of the African language systems to the American language. Despite the differences that existed among the Africans, there was enough commonality to create a climate for growth and development. William Barlow notes that "When West Africans were first brought into the United States as slaves, their shared enslavement and their shared oral traditions and folkways gave them a common base. . ." (xi). 7

There are a number of similarities and commonalities within African languages and cultures that have not been fully explored. The main core of research has focused on the obvious differences that which have long been used as the launching point for popular theories of the language acquisition of the slave population. These differences have often been used to demonstrate that the institution of slavery eroded and erased the traditional African cultures of the slaves. According to Robert Park,

The Negro, when he landed in the United States, left behind him almost everything but his dark complexion and his tropical temperament. . . .
Coming from all parts of Africa and having no common language and common tradition, the memories of Africa which they brought with them were soon lost. Other peoples have lost, under the disintegrating influence of the American environment, much of their cultural heritage. None have been so utterly cut off and estranged from their ancestral land, traditions and people (116-118).

Such types of uninformed and unenlightened suppositions are no longer given validity. Scholars are now looking at the language system of African Americans without preconceived and prejudicial conjecture clouding the issues. According to Michael D Linn,

Only recently have pidgins and Creoles engaged serious scholarly attention. The dominant attitude--one still popularly accepted--had been that they were merely corruptions of the standard languages. It was held that such corruptions resulted from imperfect learning by subordinates who somehow lacked the capacity to master 'complicated' European languages (131).

Park did not look at the pidgins and Creoles that existed in Africa. These pidgins and Creoles helped to lay a foundation for what would become Black English. What Park and others did not understand was that there were aspects of Africans and African Americans that they overlooked and misunderstood. Park, and others like him, were following in what Lawrence W. Levine calls, "the traditional historical practice of viewing the folk [African Americans] as inarticulate intellectual ciphers, as objects who were continually acted upon by forces over which they had no control. . ." (xi). While "common
language and common tradition" are important aspects of culture, culture is made up of more than just these two elements.

One of the fundamental aspects of culture is what anthropologist Robert Redfield has identified as a "style of life" (51-53) and what Janheinz Jahn refers to as a "world view" (xix). People with different languages, traditions, and religions can still share fundamental ways of looking at the world and their place in it. According to Lawrence W. Levine,

Though they [African slaves] varied widely in language, institutions, gods, and familial patterns, they shared a fundamental outlook toward the past, present, and the future and common means of cultural expression which could well have constituted the basis of a sense of common identity and world view capable of withstanding the impact of slavery (4).

Those first twenty Africans, brought to Jamestown on a Dutch vessel in 1619 did not arrive tabula rasa. They were a part of a complicated and sophisticated style of life, and they carried with them a world view that defined their world and their role in it. They may not have had a shared vocabulary, but they did share a tradition that included language and systems of language. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, "...forms of language and forms of world view [are] inseparable from each other" (155).

Africans adapted their language and language systems to the language of their captors. They began with a
pidgin, which grew into a Creole and finally evolved into a language: Black English. According to Geneva Smitherman, there is "little empirical record of this growth in what we may call its incubation period, that is, for the period from the arrival of the first slaves in 1619 up until the Revolutionary War in 1776. . . . Not until 1771 do we get an actual recorded sample of Black American speech from a black" (Talkin 8). The few written accounts of slave speech are unreliable because Black English is an oral language that does not have an orthography, and few transcribers took the time or effort to duplicate the exact words of slave speech.

The slaves learned early on that they were participants in a war with an enemy that they could not defeat in the traditional sense. Having no weapons, no outside help, no contact with reinforcements, and no means of deployment or retreat, the slave fought a war of espionage and sabotage using guerrilla tactics. Duncan Clinch Heyward records a South Carolina slave saying that expresses the tactics of this war: "De buckruh [whites] hab scheme, en de nigger hab trick, en ebery time de buckruh scheme once de nigger trick twice" (165). In Lay My Burden Down, a collection of the oral history of slavery, there are other recordings of slaves' proverbs that share this same sentiment: "White folks do as they please, and the darkies do as they can" (Botkin 1). The slaves had
determined that they would not be able to defeat their opponent, and the objective of the war became survival, survival not only of their physical selves but also survival of their history, language, culture and customs. As survival technique, slaves separated, isolated, and validated their language and culture from that of the dominant culture.

The slave also used language as a weapon. In order to be understood, Black English had to be deciphered within the context of the total culture. The oppressors did not have the knowledge to decipher the language of the slave. This separation of languages caused the slave to speak two languages: Black English and the English of the oppressor. This was acceptable to both the slave community and the oppressors because it reinforced the separation that both groups needed. Lawrence W. Levine records an old slave song that sums up the subterfuge of the slave:

Got one mind for white folks to see,  
'Nother for what I know is me;  
He don't know, he don't know my mind (xii).

As a result, Black English became code-like, layered and indirect. Meaning depended on cultural and historical knowledge as well as tonal sound and visual gestures. The language the slave used became increasingly communally oriented. The oppressive weight of slavery forced the slaves into inventing a language that was coded in order to have a way to separate themselves from the ownership of
their oppressors. This was accomplished through a rhetorical strategy that layered the meanings of words. The coded language and layered meanings allowed the slave and later the African American to forge an identity totally separated from the oppressors and virtually unknown to those outside the African American culture.

The figurative language, style, rhythm, indirectness, syntax, and layered meanings in Black English survived the transition from orality to written language in the rhetorical tropes of Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify. Like the barriers that evolved as a form of protection—word of mouth access to the language, the unconsciousness of language, code switching, layered meanings, and Masking, the rhetorical tropes of Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify are forms of separation and concealment.

Another separation of Black English and the written discourse of Common English was created by the aural quality of Black English:

The characteristic emphasis of Negro tales, the drawl, and the tricks of speeding up, are difficult to indicate on paper, Elsie Clews Parson lamented. "Italics and exclamation points are but feeble indicators; how can one express by printers' signs the significance of what is not said?—A significance conveyed by manner or by quietness of intonation, of which a good storyteller is past master" (Levine 89).

The aural nature of Black English did not lend itself to Common English. The aural characteristics of Black English
was a means by which to further separate the oppressed from their oppressors while allowing the oppressed to hold on to their culture and identity.

Today the oral traditions have evolved to encompass written discourse. The inclusiveness, and the figurative language, as well as the communal and historical meanings, are still a large part of Black English. The study of Black English is a complex and complicated enterprise that covers many elements from sound and structure to words and concepts. The transition from oral to written did not alter the basic discourse evident in the oral tradition.

The surface differences, for the most part, were eliminated in the transition because Black English is an oral language and because there is no orthography in Common English that will accommodate the style of the oral tradition. The sounds of Black English are, for the most part, taken from West African languages. Some of the surface differences that were eliminated were spelling and pronunciation issues:

> [In the] sound rule in West African languages, [there are] no consonant pairs, and few vowels or two-part vowels (diphthong); no /r/ sound and no /th/sound.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black English</th>
<th>Common English</th>
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<tr>
<td>jus</td>
<td>just</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>men</td>
<td>mend</td>
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<tr>
<td>rat or raht</td>
<td>right</td>
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(Smitherman, Talkin 7).

The elimination of surface differences made Masking
possible and helped to conceal the rhetoric of Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify. The unaware reader may assume that the written words of the African American author, because they look the same and sound the same as Common English words, will have the same meaning, which may or may not be the case, because in the oral tradition and in the written discourse of African American authors, meaning depends on context and communal and historical knowledge. The transition from oral to written did not alter the basic discourse evident in the oral tradition.

According to Ferdinand de Saussure, “The structure of a language is a social product of our language faculty. At the same time, it is also a body of necessary conventions adopted by society to enable members of society to use their language faculty” (3). The Black English oral tradition is a social product of a society that lived under the sword of slavery and survived through adaptation and secrecy. According to Nikki Giovanni, “We [African Americans] maintained an oral tradition and created a written one.” In the process of changing from oral to written, other adaptations took place. Authors had to invent ways to signify the tonal, lyrical, non-verbal style of Black English in the written text. For example, Toni Morrison uses words taken from Black English in Jazz without footnote or explanation. For those who have knowledge of Black English, these words “put you in the
mind" of the place, people, times and gestures of the people who spoke these words. The written word becomes the voice for the oral language of Black English.

1. I choose to use the term Black English, rather than other terms that have become popular such as African American English or Merican, because when I first began my research, two African American scholars, J.L. Dillard and Geneva Smitherman, were referring to the language used by most African Americans as Black English. These two scholars did not call this language a dialect or a slang or any other term that might have implied that the language was either substandard or a derivative of the "real" language of America. They not only looked at the language, they also investigated the history and the culture of the people who spoke the language. The person who defines and names has power.

2. Traditionally the language of White America is called Standard English. The word standard implies a hierarchy; if there is a standard then there must be a substandard. If standard English is the model, then Black English would have to be substandard. I prefer the term Common English. I realize that the word "common" could bring up a number of issues also, but in this instance I am using it as in belonging equally to or shared by a community or society as a whole.

3. While investigating the transition from the Black English oral tradition to written discourse, I noticed that African American writers were, for the most part using Common English to write Black English concepts. African American writers were Masking the Black English oral tradition with Common English. African Americans are also using Common English in their conversational discourse, but the underlying meaning of their discourse is usually from the Black English oral tradition.
4. The rhetoric, structures, rituals and styles of the Black English oral traditions are an essential part of the African American church. In the African American church Black English is valued and taught. Smitherman explores the impact of the African American church on Black English in Talkin and Testifyin.


6. Commerce and the pidgins that must have evolved around it in Africa are usually not addressed in the studies of Black English. Omitting this aspect of language in Africa implies that it did not exist, that there were no trade languages and that there was no interaction between African people and no interaction with the world outside of Africa. It is well known that Africa did not exist in a vacuum. Africans had explored the world, including South and North America. African people had traded all over the world. There were systems in Africa for the exchange of information with people who spoke different languages. Africans who were brought to America as slaves had access to knowledge of other people and other languages.

7. Barlow's book, Looking Up at Down, primarily deals with the evolution of blues culture. Because a major part of my research is the oral tradition, I found that I had to look to music for a better understanding of orality. I found that by studying music, especially music created by African Americans, I could better understand the function and psychodynamics of the oral tradition. What better way to look at orality than to study a medium that uses neither letter not lexicon to communicate.

8. One could argue that this type of research and its finding are dated, but according to J.L. Dillard, this type of research was the norm until 1964 when William A. Stewart took the study of Black English in another direction (29).

9. This may at first seem to be a harsh judgement, but
when the language of Robert Park's essay is closely examined it speaks for itself: What does “tropical temperament” mean? How and why would Park think that Africans had no “common languages and common tradition”? It was already known that there were connections in languages of European cultures. Why would Park, or any one else, assume that African languages and cultures developed in a vacuum?

10. The term “war” implies open armed conflict between two fractions. This was the case during slavery. Though subtle and insidious, there was an open, armed conflict. The arms that were used were not the usual weapons of war, but they still inflicted destruction and death as well as long-term suffering.

11. “Put you in the mind” is an old Black English saying that means something has the ability to take you to another time, and place. It causes you to experience the tactile and visceral experience of some other place, at some other time, like a split second of time when the smells, sights, and sounds of a previous event are relived.
Signifying

Deep down in the jungle, so they say,
There's a signifyin' monkey down the way. . . .

Signifying is the art of verbal battle that defines community and those who are in it. Participants are engaged in a contest of wits and performance, and their weapons are words. Signifying in the oral tradition was and is, according to Clarence Major, "performance talk; to berate someone; to censure in twelve or fewer statements; speaking ironically" (416). Signifying has been defined in a number of ways, by its characteristic of structure, as a speech act, as rhetoric, as cultural self-definition, and as a form of delineation (Carol D. Lee, 10).

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., uses Signifying as a basis for his theory of literary criticism. Gates says of Signifying, "To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify" (xxiii). According to Gates, African American writers "... read each other, and seem intent on refiguring what we might think of as key canonical topi and tropes received from the black [English oral] tradition itself" (xxii). Using Signifying, Gates tries to demonstrate a system of rhetoric that becomes the trope of literary revision which in turn is the basis for his critical theory. In other words, Gates says that African American authors read each other's works and then "signify" on them by revising certain terms, tropes, and/or voices
within their own text. He calls this "... the Talking Book, of double-voiced texts that talk to other texts" (xxv). Gates gives the examples of Zora Neal Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*:

If Hurston's novel seems to have been designed to declare that, indeed, a text could be written in black dialect, then it seems to me that Walker's *The Color Purple* aims to do just that, as a direct revision of Hurston's explicit and implicit strategies of narration. . . . Her use of the epistolary form to write a novel in the language seemingly spoken by Hurston's protagonist is perhaps the most stunning instance of revision in the tradition of the black novel (xxvi).

Gates' theory of renaming and revising does not fit comfortably with the oral tradition of Signifying. Gates does not thoroughly consider Signifying's censuring, criticizing, or trickster aspects. In Signifying there is almost always a berating, censuring aspect to the discourse. According to Geneva Smitherman Signifying is

The verbal art of ritualized insult, in which the speaker puts down, needles, talks about *(signifies on)* someone, to make a point or sometimes just for fun. It exploits the unexpected, using quick verbal surprises and humor, and it is generally characterized by nonmalicious and principled criticism. *(Black 206).*

He also does not address Signifying as an act of delineation, its didactic nature, or its inclusiveness.

Gates' theory does not lend itself to the in-group aspect of Signifying or to its game-like quality, nor does it
include enough of the structure and rules of the oral
tradition of Signifying.

Children begin to Signify with what I call the "Yo
Mamma's," for example, "Your momma hair so short she have to
roll her hair with needles," or "Your momma so black, when
she cut her leg she bleed coffee." As the child matures,
Signifying becomes more sophisticated and complex. Maya
Angelou has what she calls her Signifying poem, called "No
loser, No Weeper":

"I Hate to lose something,"
then she bent her head
"even a dime, I wish I was dead.
I can't explain it. No more to be said,
Cept I hate to lose something."

"I lost a doll once and cried for a week.
She could open her eyes, and do all but speak.
I believe she was took, by some doll-snatching-sneak
I tell you, I hate to lose something."

"A watch of mine once, got up and walked away.
It had twelve numbers on it and for the time of
day.
I'll never forget it and all I can say
Is I really hate to lose something."

Now if I felt that way bout a watch and a toy,
What you think I feel bout my lover-boy?
I ain't threatening you madam, but he is my
evening's joy.
And I mean I really hate to lose something." (9)

In this poem, the speaker has subtly and indirectly
warned her rival of impending doom and alerted all the
other women present of her knowledge of the situation.
This is an excellent example of the berating and censuring
aspect of Signifying. The speaker in this poem is berating the "other" woman, while censuring the women in the group who may have had prior knowledge of the situation and were talking about the speaker behind her back. The speaker also reaffirms her position as part of the group and the positions of the listeners, the other card players, and the reader by including them in the act of Signification.

This is also a good example of how communal knowledge fills the gaps of an oral language in written discourse. The author did not have to describe the posture, gestures, or facial expressions of the participants. The gaps of this discourse allow the reader to participate in the Signifying act by filling them in with communal knowledge and therefore they reaffirm the reader's position in the group.

In the oral tradition, Signifying was and is an in-group activity. The participants, as well as their audience, are essential in the Signification act. Smitherman says, "Individual participation is necessary for community survival. Balance in the community, as in the universe, consists of maintaining these interdependent relationships" (75).

Signifying is an act of delineation. Those who cannot Signify, or are not Signified on or with, are outside of the group. According to Carol D. Lee, "... the adolescent, in particular, who cannot signify has no
status and no style, is a kind of outsider who is incapable of participation in social conversation" (11). Another reason Signifying is used as a marker of delineation is because, as Claudia Mitchell-Kernan says, Signifying is "a way of encoding messages or meanings which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection" (311). She further states, what pretends to be informative [in the Signifying act] may intend to be persuasive. The hearer is thus constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse. The context embeddedness of meaning is attested to by both our reliance on the given context and, most importantly, by our inclination to construct additional context from our background knowledge of the world (314).

The denotative meaning of words is not enough for understanding in the Signifying act. A seemingly insulting remark may in fact be complimentary, for example the word nigger is defined in The American Heritage Dictionary as "Offensive Slang. A black or member of any dark-skinned people" (841). But within the African American culture the word nigger can also be complimentary or even neutral. According to Clarence Major,

When used by a white person in addressing a black person, usually [The word "nigger"] is offensive and disparaging—and has been so since the end of the Civil War; used by black people among themselves, it is a racial term with undertones of warmth and goodwill—reflecting, aside from the irony, a tragi-
comic sensibility that is aware, on some level, of the emotional history of race. . . .
Even white people can be niggers. . . speaking of the U.S. government. Queen Latifah was quoted in Newsweek: 'Those niggers don't know what the fuck they doing' (320).

Geneva Smitherman defines nigger according to its context within the discourse:

Nigga [is] used with a variety of meanings, ranging from positive to negative to neutral.
1) 'She my main nigga,' that is, she is my close friend, my back-up. 2) 'Now that Brotha, see, he ain like them ol e-lights, he real, he is a shonuff nigga,' i.e., he is culturally Black and rooted in Blackness and the African American Experience. 3) 'That party was live; it was wall-to-wall niggas there,' a generic, neutral use of the word, meaning simply that many African Americans were present at the party" (Black 167).

One ritualistic Signifying phrase is "Nigga please."
Because of the variety of meanings given to the word Nigger, the participants in the Signification act must be aware that meaning relies on the context embedded in the discourse. "Nigga please" can be said jokingly, lovingly, or full of hatred and anger and thus this phrase can be used to signify a number of emotions and meanings. Signifying is an indirect discourse that relies on cultural context for meaning. It alludes to and implies things that are never made explicit. Signifying is usually only executed within the African American culture and then is further restricted because it is usually only performed with and by people who know one another.
In the oral tradition, Signifying is a form used by the trickster. The trickster uses the indirect meaning of Signifying to complicate and confuse the unaware or the listener who is not, as Mitchell-Kernan says, "constrained to attend to all potential meaning carrying symbolic systems in speech events—the total universe of discourse" (314). The trickster can also engage in Signification, as in the trickster figures of Aunt Nancy, Brer Rabbit, and High John. Trickster figures are usually depicted as helpless and powerless when in reality they are sources of power, conjurers, outlaws, and reflections of communal values. Trickster tales are part of the Africanisms that survived in African American culture. As Lawrence W. Levine says, African trickster tales revolved around the strong pattern of authority so central to African cultures. African trickster figures were more obsessed with manipulating the strong and reversing the normal structure of power and prestige. Afro-American slaves, cast into a far more rigidly fixed and certainly a more alien authority system, could hardly have been expected to neglect a cycle of tales so ideally suited to their need (105).

The trickster tales were used as a release. When the smaller, less powerful trickster overcame his powerful adversary, the slave could identify and find a vicarious victory in the triumphs of the trickster. The trickster also taught the slave that there was a way to fight against bondage. Levine goes on to say,
The beings that came to life in these [trickster] stories were so created as human enough to be identified with but at the same time exotic enough to allow both storytellers and listeners a latitude and freedom that came only with much more difficult and daring in tales explicitly concerning human beings (103-104).

In the story of Tar Baby there are layers of Signification. Brer Rabbit's treatment of the Tar Baby is an act of Signification, and the Tar Baby's lack of action that precipitates Brer Rabbit's actions is also an act of Signification. Tar Baby, by his lack of action, not speaking to Brer Rabbit, is breaking the rules of discourse and social interaction of the African American community. The youth and "Blackness" of Tar Baby in juxtaposition to Brer Rabbit's age and social standing is a censuring reminder to the listener of the correct behavior that is required in the African American community and the consequence of flouting or disregarding the communal codes of conduct. Brer Rabbit, by striking and berating the Tar Baby, has stepped out of his community and into the community of White America, becoming like the slave master. His actions are a reminder of the denunciation of African Americans who take on the trappings of the "outside" culture.

On the surface, the trickster tales, such as Brer Rabbit, seem to be of the simple form of the strong attacking the weak and the weak fighting back though.
trickery, but there is more to these tales than that. While the weak do evade the strong through trickery, the weak also learn something about the strong and the possibilities of survival. In other words, the weak learn the ways of the strong in order to use that knowledge as a weapon. The tales themselves are also didactic. The tales teach a life lesson about survival, and they also teach the listener how to listen, as in the story of the snake. The farmer knows what the snake is when he picks it up, but when the snake bites him, the farmer is surprised. After all, had not the farmer nursed the snake back to health? When questioned, the snake simply replies, "You knew I was a snake when you picked me up." This trickster story teaches the listener to be cognizant of language and the "enemy". If the listener does not listen closely to this tale, the points and meanings will be lost. Most of the forms of Signification in the oral tradition teach something to the participants.

Another aspect of Signifying is its game-like quality. Mitchell-Kernan examines this aspect of Signifying: "Another tactic of the signifier is to allude to something which somehow has humor value or negative import for the hearer in a casual fashion--information dropping" (320). Mitchell-Kernan gives examples of conversations she has recorded, "Thelma, these kids look more and more like their fathers everyday. (Signifying
about the fact that the children do not all have the same father.)" (320). Signifying can also make a point without negative, biting humor:

After I had my little boy, I swore I was not having any more babies. I thought four kids was a nice-size family. But it didn't turn out that way. I was a little bit disgusted and didn't tell anybody when I discovered I was pregnant. My sister came over one day and I had started to show by that time.

ROCHELLE: Girl, you sure do need to join the Metrecal for lunch bunch.

GRACE: (non-committally) Yea, I guess I am putting on a little weight.

ROCHELLE: Now look here, girl, we both standing here soaking wet and you still trying to tell me it ain't raining.

Grace found the incident highly amusing. She reports the incident to illustrate Rochelle's clever use of words, and the latter's intent being simply to let her know in a humorous way that she was aware of her pregnancy. . . . Such messages may include context which might be construed as mildly insulting except that they are treated by the interlocutors as joking behavior (Mitchell-Kernan 318-319).

Signifying can also be deadly serious as in Langston Hughes' "Ask Your Momma":

And they asked me right at Christmas
If my blackness, would it rub off?
I said, ask your Momma.

Hughes' poem centers around identity, the definition of self. When he is asked if his blackness would rub off, his very existence is in question, his "black" color and the behavior patterns, beliefs, history, languages and thoughts characteristic of a community or population
that makes, names, him Black. Is his "blackness" contagious, is it something that can stain others, something that is not permanent, constant, durable, immutable, or stable, thereby not real or human? The "they" who ask this question are not people of African descent, not other 'blacks' but some other cultural group that is trying to define Blackness in a derogatory manner.

The answer, "ask your Momma," has many layers of meaning. There is a sexual inference: your mother would know because I have been close enough to her to rub my blackness on her. There is a racial inference: your mother is black enough to know the answer to your question. In either case you, the questioner, have been "tainted" with my blackness. "Ask your Momma" also has historical communal meaning. It is a ritual response to childhood Signification. According to Michell-Kernan, "An admirable instance of Signifying might well involve a remark laced with taboo terms of a twelve-year-old boy. A thirty-year-old woman or man would not likely utilize the same criterion. . . " (313). Children, not adults, use insults that include derogatory remarks about family, especially mothers. Hughes is showing his contempt and disrespect for the question and the questioner by inverting the rules of Signification, by treating the questioner like an unschooled child. There
is also the tone and rhetorical value that "Christmas" brings into the total Signifying act that contributes to the serious nature of the poem. Christmas is supposed to a time of brotherly love, a happy, family, child-like time of wonder and peace. Christmas is also at the end of the year, which traditionally signifies a time of closure and the approach of new beginnings. In Hughes' poem, Christmas is not a time of brotherly love, not a time of child-like wonder and peace, and not a time of new beginnings; rather it is the same old thing. Hughes layers Signification upon Signification to create a poem that is succinct, concise and powerful.

Layered meanings and historical communal knowledge can make an act of Signification gravely profound. Ralph Wiley, in "Why Black People Have No Culture," states that "Black people have no culture because most of it is out on loan to white people. With no interest" (qtd. in Smitherman, Black 22). The play on words of this Signification is rhetorically complex, compelling and persuasive. Daryl Cumber Dance, in his collection of African American sayings, gives another example of Signifying when it is deadly seriousness: "Whitey gives the Peace sign to some Brothers. They reply, 'Yeah, we have been waiting for a PIECE of you ass for a long time'" (221).

The tone of the Signifying act is defined by the
message form and the function of the act. The style, spirit, setting, and message as it relates to the participants and audience are also elements that decide the tone of the act. Signifying is sophisticated and complicated enough to be humorous and deadly serious at the same time.

Signifying is an ambiguous way of communication that is understood through group interaction. Because of its layered meaning and ambiguity, it is a form of implicature. According to Paul Grice, conversational implicatures "are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts; and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction" (26). In other words implicatures are gaps or fissures in the conversation that have to be filled by mutual agreement between the speakers in order to have understanding.

John F. Callahan says, "... Storytelling performances created a community of speech, interpretation, and response. ...Ironically, the dehumanizing conditions of slavery, its prohibitions against literacy, against African language and ritual, reinforced the communal values of the oral tradition" (26). Part of Signifying is its use of community speech, interpretation, and responses. Conversational
implicature, like Signifying requires mutual agreement for understanding. An example of conversational implicature in Signifying is a conversation between Macon Dead and his sister Pilate in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*:

"Why can't you dress like a woman?" He was standing by the stove. "What's that Sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings? What are you trying to make me look like in this town? . . . "

Pilate had sat there listening to him, her wondering eyes resting on his face. Then she said, "I been worried sick about you too, Macon" (20).

There is a gap between what Macon asks and Pilate's response. If taken literally, one would expect Pilate to answer each of Macon's questions. Because Pilate, Macon and the reader share knowledge of oral discourse, the gap between his questions and her response is filled through implication. Pilate's answer is very complex. Through implication, she is demonstrating that she understands that her brother cares more about his reputation and appearance than he cares about her. Because Pilate, Macon, and possibly the reader share a knowledge of Black English, another layer is add to the decoding of Pilate's message: Signifying.⁹

Through the act of Signifying, Pilate is also showing Macon and the audience that she has not given up on him. Because she Signifies on him, she is giving him
a chance to participate in a communal activity and thereby become part of the group. Pilate is also giving the reader a chance to participate in the act of Signification because the reader is the audience. In the oral tradition, audience is an important part of Signifying. The audience judges the participants and extols them to greater heights. The audience also is needed to witness, thereby validate, the performance and the performers. The reader, as audience, witnesses Macon's lack of participation.

In *Song of Solomon*, Macon Dead has relinquished all ties with his African American culture. He has lost his heritage, his history and even his name and assimilated into White culture. He lives in an African American community and is married to an African American woman, but his values are those of the White culture. Because he has lost touch with his African American culture, Macon is fragmented and incomplete. On the other hand, although Pilate is also a person apart--born without a navel and having invented herself--she is still a part of her community/culture. This is demonstrated because she participates in communal/cultural rituals such as Signifying. Macon does not even recognize the Signifying act, which shows the reader and the characters in the novel that he is not part of the group.
The unique conversational implicature of Signifying reveals the cultural awareness not only of the characters in the story but also the awareness of the reader and author. In order to be realized, there must be mutual knowledge of the need to fill in gaps with necessary information to make connections. The rhetorical trope of Signifying fits very comfortably with implicature because both require cooperation and mutual understanding to be effective. According to Susan Gubar, gaps, absence, and blankness are "a mysterious but potent act of resistance" (305). Implicature as an act of resistance fits well with the Black English oral tradition of concealment as a form of survival. Because meaning in the Black English oral tradition and in implicature relies on mutual understanding and cooperation between the participants, those privy to communal, cultural, and historic knowledge can fill the gaps created by implicature with the layered and context-specific meanings of Black English. The gaps created by implicature are sites of resistance, silences that protect and reinforce the underground struggle for identity and self-actualization that imbues the African American culture. Marianne Hirsch sees silence as a form of discourse, a form of communication. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., also examines silence as a trope that is not "the presence of voice at
all, but its absence" (167), the power or process of reason. Absence is an expression; implicature is communication by negation. But these gaps and silences are not empty vacuums, not sealed off from external influences: rather they are powerful places where the unconscious becomes conscious and meaning lives.

Implicature also is part of the system that allows non-verbal gesture and tonal inflection to become a part of the written discourse. In Black English the way one says something, the tone, the facial gestures, and the body language give meaning to the discourse. These features can not be written into a text without a great deal of awkwardness. Instead, implicature fills in the gaps caused by the limitations of written language. When the writer and the reader have a mutual understanding of language, then the opening line of Morrison's Jazz, "Sth, I know that woman," becomes the hand-on-the-hip, sitting-on-the-front-stoop, minding-everybody's-business, I-know something-you-ought-to-know woman who is a trickster character from the oral tradition (1).10

Implication within the rhetorical trope of Signifying is a powerful tool of persuasive communication because it is a meeting place of mutual understanding. It also fits comfortably with the inclusiveness and concealing nature of the Black English
oral tradition. The rhetorical tropes taken from Black English oral traditions are part of a distinctive, ritualized, narrative tradition and can be used to illustrate a theory of literary criticism that is grounded in African American culture.

In its transformation from oral to written, some of the features of Signifying were modified. It could not be as restricted as it had been since, in written texts, it had to become more universal for a wider audience to understand its meanings. But even in written forms the meaning relies on the context and background knowledge of the participants. Another modification in written discourse was that of the participants. Signifying, in the oral tradition, was a ritual that took place in conversational discourse, whereas in written discourse Signifying has become more diversified. Characters can Signify in dialogue, and the text can Signify on the characters in the story, on the reader, or on another text. An interesting development in written discourse is that the narrator, who is not technically involved in a dialogue with either the characters of the text or the reader, can and does Signify on both the characters and the reader.

In the oral tradition, participants would Signify on and with each other, and the audience would respond with verbal and nonverbal signals as well as laughter, whoops,
and hollers that let the participants know who was winning the verbal battle. In literature, group participation is limited by the constraints of written discourse. It is difficult to achieve in written discourse the rapid-fire responses and the audience participation that are a trademark of Signifying from the oral tradition.

It would be difficult to write a scene in which ten people participate in the Signifying act. But it is not unlikely for ten or more people, in a barbershop or at a party, to participate in a Signifying act. Logistics is one of the reasons for adaptations of Signifying in written discourse.

This adaptation indicates inclusion and separation. In the written text, characters who participate in the act of Signifying are part of the group, and those who do not participate are fragmented and outside. The delineation of group and other also includes the reader. The reader can become part of the group by recognizing and/or participating in the acts of Signification that are taking place within the text. The reader can be Signified on by a character or narrator in the text. If readers participate by recognition of the Signifying act, then they have (1) proved that they are part of the group, (2) been notified that the rituals and rules of the Black English oral tradition are enforced within this text, (3) realized that the story, characters, and
meanings should be derived, decoded, and understood through the Black English oral tradition. According to Morrison,

> My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and I think that is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about telling the story; it's about involving the reader... we, (you, the, reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to feel this experience (Tate 125).

This "coming together" in written discourse has taken the place of the face-to-face, ritualistic meetings where people got together to reconfirm their membership in the community. Morrison is following the rules of discourse taken from the oral tradition of Black English. She is inviting the reader to become part of the community, and mirroring the oral tradition of determining inclusion and exclusion by participation in communal rituals. When she "demands" the reader's participation, she is in essence asking, "Are you part of the group?" Morrison is also reaffirming that she is a member of the community because she is upholding the communal standard of correct behavior. Morrison is participating in the act of Signification through writing, and she is inviting the reader to participate.

In written discourse, the immediacy of the Signification act is lost. To compensate, Signifying in written discourse uses layered meaning and indirect messages to engage the reader in the Signifying act,
thereby bringing the reader into the community of the text. Participating and validating the African American cultural ritual of Signifying forces the reader to actively participate in the community of the story, thereby reaffirming the community of African Americans through the indirect and layered meanings of Signifying and bringing an immediacy to the reading.

The indirectness and layered meanings of Signifying have become more universal, less restricted in written discourse. In the oral tradition, Signifying depended heavily on communal meanings. Signifying was so group-oriented that one had to be in continuous contact with the community in order to understand some Signifying. In the oral tradition, Signifying is usually gender specific: for the most part, men Signify with men and women signify with women. It is also age specific: children do not Signify with adults. When there is a breach of convention, there is usually a significant reason.

In written discourse the community has expanded, and the gender and ages groups of Signifying have been merged in one sense, because the author has no control over who is reading the text. But within the text, the characters follow the communal rules of discourse taken from the oral tradition—except under dire circumstances. When the communal rules of discourse are breached, this is an indication that the reader should pay careful attention.
In the oral tradition, the participants of Signification have some control over their audience, and the audience has some control over the participants. The audience, by their actions, both verbal and non-verbal, can direct or end an act of Signification. A worst case scenario would be if the audience ignored or walked away from the Signifiers, thereby putting an end to the event. The participants, the persons actually engaged in the Signification, have some control over the event because they can decide the topic, the tone, the lesson taught, their opponent(s), the membership of the audience, and the situation or setting of the event.

In written discourse the author does not have the control over the event that the participants and audience in an oral event have, but the author still has some control. By not providing an explanation of the rules, history, significance or purpose of Signifying, the author limits the audience to those who have cultural and/or communal knowledge of Signifying. The author also is able to repeat key acts of Signification using different characters, audiences, and points of view. This allows the author to reinforce the act of Signification, and it also allows the readers more than one opportunity to become engaged in the act of Signification. The author has control over the Signifying event within the novel but has little or no control over the reader as a participant of the
event.

In written discourse, boundaries of the Signifying act overlap and have been enlarged to encompass a distant but involved participant: the reader. There is a Signifying act taking place within the world of the text, and at the same time there may be a Signifying act taking place in the world of the reader, if the reader is participating in the Signification that is taking place in the text. The reader must already have knowledge of Signifying to recognize it in written discourse, and the reader must have knowledge of the Black English oral tradition to understand the rhetoric of Signifying. Moreover the Signification can not be so communally limited that the reader may not or can not understand or make the necessary connection for meaning. When Toni Morrison in Song of Solomon refers to the lynching of Emmett Till by invoking just his last name, this lynching is well known enough to be recognized and its implications understood without explanation. When Morrison refers to the consequences of slavery in the epigraph of Beloved, she realizes that some of her audience may not have communal or historical knowledge of this event and so she repeats the act of Signification throughout the novel, making memory, slavery and its consequences a symbol within the story.

Physically, written discourse reaches a vastly larger audience. Men, women, and children must be able to decode
the indirect message of the Signifying act. The communal knowledge necessary for understanding must be more universal in written discourse than in oral discourse. Authors also repeat key acts of Signification: they re-write and re-use the Signifying act so that the audience is given more than one chance at understanding. But, even as written discourse is opening up Signification, Signification is still a predominately African American tradition, and the language the African American author uses is, for the most part, Common English, but the Common English is a Mask for Black English. The meaning and nuances of the written language derive their meaning from Black English. So, on the one hand, written discourse opened up Signification, and on the other hand Signifying remains as closed as it had always been because without knowledge of Black English there is no recognition of, or awareness of, Signification.

1. This is the traditional beginning of the oral poem "The Signifying Monkey." There are any number of versions of this poem, but traditionally they all begin with "Deep down in the jungle. . . ."

2. Signifying has been called the Dozens, Dirty Dozens, Playing the Dozens, Cappin, Siggin, Disin, Mackin, Talking Jive, Talking Shit, and most recently, Snaps.

3. There has been much discussion about the origin of
Signifying. Roger D. Abrahams lists a number of possible origins and histories of Signifying (295).

4. I heard my son and one of his friends throw out these lines when they were about 8 years old.

5. Maya Angelou spoke at California State University, San Bernardino in 1992. Before reading this poem she prefaced it by saying that it was her Signifying poem. She said that when she wrote it she pictured five older African American women sitting around a table playing "Rise and Fly," and one of them begins to speak, "I hate to lose something. . . ."

6. The encoding feature of Signifying is one of the reasons it is so compatible with implicature. To decode meaning, the participants must have mutual and cooperative understanding. Implicature relies on cooperation and mutual knowledge.

7. This story is Signifying on the farmer in the tale and on the listeners of the tale. The farmer is being censured for forgetting to be aware of the trickster and the enemy. The listener is being reminded, through the farmer's censure, of the consequences of forgetting.

8. In this type of tale, knowing the enemy is all important, because as Lawrence W. Levine has so admirably stated, "The life of every slave could be altered by the most arbitrary and amoral acts. They could be whipped, sexually assaulted, ripped out of societies in which they had deep roots, and bartered away for pecuniary profit by men and women who were also capable of treating them with kindness and consideration and who professed belief in a moral code which they held up for emulation not only by their children but often by their slaves as well" (114).

9. Pilate and Macon are aware of Black English because, at times, they speak it.

10. Grice was looking at conversational implicature. I
argue that implicatures exist not only in conversation and
the dialogue of characters, but also in narration and
description. African American authors use implicature to
fill in the gaps caused by Masking. The symbols used to
express common English in written discourse are not
sufficient representations for the Black English oral
tradition. The gaps that this insufficiency causes must be
filled in by the reader.

11. The audience does more than let the participants know
if they are winning the verbal battle. They let the
participants know if they are "gittin' over." In Black
English "gittin over" means reaching their audience on an
emotional and intellectual level. It also means that the
participants' talk is relevant and new, witty, and
evocative. The audience's response sets the tone for the
Signifying performance. The audience also serves as
witnesses, to attest to the membership in the community of
all those present who are participating, and to attest to
the non-membership of those who are not participating.
Signifying as a Rhetorical Trope in Toni Morrison's Works

Everything that [the African American] touches is re-interpreted for his own use.
Zora Neal Hurston

According to Toni Morrison, "The most valuable point of entry into the question of cultural (or racial) distinction, the one most fraught, is its language--its unpoliced, seditious, confrontational, manipulative, inventive, disruptive, masked and unmasked language" (qtd., Rigney 7). In her fiction, Morrison uses Signifying as a rhetorical trope to indicate inclusion and separation. In her texts, characters who participate in the act of Signifying are part of the group, while those who do not are fragmented and outside. The indirect and layered meanings of Signifying force the reader to actively participate in the community of the story. Terry Otten discusses the danger of otherness in Morrison's stories: "In all Morrison's novels alienation from community, or 'the village', invariably leads to dire consequences, and the reassertion of community is necessary for the recovery of order and wholeness" (93).

The reader who recognizes and participates in Signifying is part of the community of the novel and the community of African Americans. Recognition of Signification gives insight to the story and to the characters and is reaffirmation of group membership.
Morrison uses Signifying in her works to produce a merger of three distinct groups: the individual character, the community of characters within the text, and the reader. The aware character and the aware reader, through recognition and decoding of Signifying, are not only included in the community/group but also recognize those who are not.

The Bluest Eye is about being outside and what happens to those who are not part of the group. Of the two families, the MacTeers are part of the community and the Breedloves are not. The juxtaposition of these two families makes a clear statement that being outside is dangerous and deadly. The Bluest Eye is also the story of how Claudia and Frieda MacTeer do not offer Pecola Breedlove the opportunity to become part of the community. Those who are members of the group have an obligation to invite those who are outside into the group. Claudia and Frieda fail to honor this obligation and pay the price for not observing the rules of proper conduct in their community. They do not extend, through Signification, the solicitation of communal membership to Pecola.

In The Bluest Eye, Claudia, the narrator of this passage, says,

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty
spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it punctuated with warm-pulse laughter. . . . The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their face, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre (16).

This is a lyrical description of the Signifying conversation that Mrs. MacTeer and her friends are having about the MacTeer's roomer, Mr. Henry. It is also a lesson in oral discourse. Claudia has learned the signs that make meaning, the turn taking, the tonal quality of her community's oral discourse. Mrs. MacTeer is teaching her children the proper conduct of their community. Because there is Signifying in the MacTeer family, Claudia and Frieda learn the expectations of their community by observing adult behavior. The MacTeers are indicators of community membership because they Signify. The well-known "Three quarts of milk" soliloquy that Mrs. MacTeer gives is the epitome of Signifying (22):

Three quarts of milk. That's what was in that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now they ain't none. Not a drop. I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk! What the devil does anybody need with three quarts of milk? . . . I don't know what I'm supposed to be running here, a charity ward, I guess. Time for me to get out of the giving line and get in the getting line. . . . (22-23).

Her speech is directed, indirectly, at Claudia, Frieda, and Pecola, but it is also directed at the reader. The reader is given the opportunity to participate in the
Signifying act by recognizing it as Signifying and relating it to personal or communal knowledge of other women, who have also participated in the ritual of Signifying. Mrs. MacTeer is teaching her audience about waste, but she is also teaching them life lessons; one must be ever vigilant against poverty because it is always waiting to consume the unaware; and there are limits to things, too much of anything is bad (which is a lesson that Baby Suggs must also learn in Beloved); and family takes care of family (23). But even though Mrs. MacTeer includes Pecola in this lesson, in this one act of Signifying, it is not enough for Pecola who needs this interaction with and from her peer group, namely Claudia and Frieda.

The Breedloves are not part of the community. Pecola Breedlove is placed in the MacTeer family because "that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head, and everybody, as a result was outdoors. Outdoors, we knew, was the real terror of life" (17). Being outdoors in this story is synonymous with being outside of the community, fragmented, isolated, without a safe haven.

An indication of Pecole's otherness is the inversion of the Signifying act that takes place with Pecola and the three whores. Though the three whores Signify with Pecola, they cannot be the doorway through which Pecola
gains entry into the community because Signifying in the oral tradition is age specific. The only time an adult and child participate in the act of Signifying is in a parent/child dynamic, when the child is being taught a lesson or is being guided by the adult. Claudia and Frieda know the rules of discourse of their community: "We didn't initiate talk with grown-ups; we answered their questions" (22). With the whores, Pecola inverts the community rules of discourse because she initiates the conversation: "The women were friendly, but slow to begin talk. Pecola always took the initiative with Marie, who, once inspired, was difficult to stop" (44). Pecola does not participate verbally or non-verbally, staying outside of the Signifying act:

'All I know is, them bandy little legs of yours is every bit as old as mine.'
'Don't worry 'bout my bandy legs. That's the first thing they push aside.'
All three of the women laughed" (45).

Not Pecola; Pecola watches but does not participate. The whores are also not following the rule of Signification for adults and children, since they are not guiding or teaching Pecola a lesson.

Pecola is almost invisible. She is not one of the speakers or part of the audience, because she is not following the rules of discourse of her community for either audience or speaker. She is an absence in the midst of activity. She could be looked at as a form of
implicature, a gap that the reader is obliged to fill through communal knowledge, knowledge of others who are absent from communal participation, in fiction and in life.¹ By running away, Pecola's brother leaves an absence, a question of why without any answers. Morrison's works often try to fill gaps created by questions that were left unanswered and unanswerable—the question of slavery, questions raised by disremembering, questions of heritage, history and human nature—and hence Morrison's works are inherently Signifying.

Filling these gaps causes the reader, text, and characters to connect in a way that parallels the connections of community made through the Signifying act in the oral tradition. If Pecola is a form of implicature, then she is also a form of Signification. Pecola Signifies on the reader and the community of the text because she is a deadly serious condemnation of outsiderness and the obligations of the community.

People do not have to be perfect or reach some high standard of morality, beauty, or intellect to be part of the community; all they have to do is to participate in the rituals of the community. Even though the three whores are described as "Three merry gargoyles. Three merry harridans," they are part of their community. They "hated men, all men, without shame, apology, or
discrimination. Neither did they respect women. "..." but they have a place in the community (47-48). Their place and membership sharply contrast with Pecola's lack of place and membership because even though they are "fallen" by a standard from outside the ethics of the African American community, they are members of that community.

Throughout the story, Pecola remains outside: "We tried to see her without looking at her, and never, never, went near. Not because she was absurd, or repulsive, or because we were frightened, but because we had failed her" (158). Part of Claudia and Frieda's failure is in not inviting Pecola into the community through the act of Signification. By this failure and their need to "say . . . why" (9) their story becomes an act of Signification, a censuring through layered and indirect implication, a lesson on communal conduct, and a reminder that there are rules and reasons for rules, and that the consequences of ignoring or breaking the rules are grave.

The Bluest Eye is also a lesson to those who are outside the community, a lesson that teaches to beware of outsiderness in ourselves and others. It also reaffirms the communal knowledge that through individual participation in communal activities there is survival. Those who participate in the communal activity of
Signifying, Claudia and her family, survive and those that do not participate, Pecola and her family, perish.

Keith Byerman's explanation of the importance of community in *Sula* mirrors the importance of community in the African American culture:

It establishes the forms of male-female, parent-child, individual-society, good-evil relationships. It creates rituals recognizing the mysteries of birth, sex, and death; it codifies acceptable attitudes toward power, whether personal, sexual, or racial. In other words, it makes the conventions that define life in the Bottom" (65).

Sula is an important member of the community in the Bottom, because she is the means, "the form," by which others in the community define themselves. She has been called a pariah, a social outcast. But to be a true pariah, Sula must be outside of her community. Sula, while strange, is a member of her community. She participates in and follows the rules of the communal activity of Signifying. Arguably the most famous Signifying act that Morrison has written is Sula's soliloquy, "When Lindbergh sleeps with Bessie Smith . . ." Nel asks Sula,

'Having done all the dirt you did in this town and you still expect folks to love you?'

'Oh, they'll love me all right. . . . After all the old women have lain with the teen-agers; when all the young girls have slept with their old drunken uncles. . . .' (145).
Sula is Signifying on the community, Nel, and the reader. She is the means by which the people of the story "define life in the Bottom" (Byerman 65). The Community of the Bottom loves her because she is not what they are, the Community loves her difference, they love her because she is theirs, and they love to hate her. She is a part of them. Nel loves Sula, but she has forgotten her love in her search for proper goodness. The reader could love Sula but has probably been preoccupied judging her. It is not until Sula is gone that the community, Nel, and the reader can realize their loss. Even though Sula is wild and unpredictable, she belongs to the Bottom. She is a part of the community and she demonstrates her place in the community with her acts of Signification.

In Morrison's Song of Solomon, Milkman Dead is given a number of opportunities to participate in communal activities. Even Milkman's name is a Signification: when Freddie the janitor observes Ruth Dead nursing her too-old son, he calls the boy "A Milkman. That's what you got here, Miss Rufie. A natural milkman if ever I seen one. . ." (15). Milkman is unaware of the history behind his name because he does not participate in the rituals of communal discourse. Milkman is so disconnected that he does not know his personal or communal history. He must go on a heroic quest in
order to discover who he is, where he came from, and where he is going.

In the process he goes through trials and endeavors that prepare him to accept his heritage. One of the obstacles he must overcome is his inability to participate in communal activities. The reader can judge Milkman's progress toward his goal of communal membership by the acts of Signification he does and does not participate in. As a young man Milkman is Signified on by his Aunt Pilate and he is not aware enough to fully participate, but he is aware that something important is happening: "Now he was behaving with this strange woman as thought having the name [Dead] was a matter of deep personal pride, as though she had tried to expel him from a very special group, in which he not only belonged, but has exclusive rights" (38). Pilate helps to guide Milkman to his family name and heritage; she leads him to his community and wholeness:

...it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend... He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud... No wonder his father was afraid of them (47).

One of Milkman's most important moments comes when he is Signified on by Guitar. Milkman and Guitar had just heard the news that Emmett Till, a fourteen year old African American boy, had been lynched:
'He was crazy.'
'No. Not crazy. Young, but not crazy.'
'Who cares if he fucks a white girl? Anybody can do that. What's he bragging for? Who cares?'
'Crackers care.'
'Then they're crazier'n he is.'
'Of course. But they're alive and crazy.'
'Yeah, well fuck Till. I'm the one in trouble.'
'Did I hear you right, brother?'
'All right. I didn't mean that. I...'

Guitar Signifies on Milkman with his censuring and berating "Did I hear you right, brother?" Milkman is pulled up short by this act of Signification and he realizes that he has gone too far. This Signifying act is one of the first steps Milkman takes on his heroic quest. Milkman for the first time realizes that he is part of something bigger than himself, that he is a member of a larger group, and Guitar's "brother" brings that into focus.

When Milkman arrives in Shalimar he does not understand the rules of communal discourse: "Milkman sensed that he'd struck a wrong note" (268), and "Milkman knew that he had said something else wrong, although he didn't know what. He only knew that they [the men of Shalimar] behaved as if they'd been insulted" (269). Milkman is progressing toward communal membership. He is aware of the people around him, and he is interested in more than just himself, interested
enough to take the time to figure out what he has done and to want to correct his error:

He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his. They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers (269).

He gets his chance during the hunt. The hunters would "test him, match and beat him," then watch to see his reaction (272). When Milkman falls behind and ends up sitting alone in a dark forest, he begins to look at his life and actions and he realizes that he had distanced himself from others, had wanted to "share [other's] happiness" but not their pain (280).

When Milkman reacts to the hunter's challenge with honesty and humanity—"[I was] scared to death"—they begin to Signify on him and he responds: "Milkman was the butt of their humor, but it was good-humored humor, unlike the laughter the trip had begun with" (284).

Milkman finally accepts the invitation to become a member of the community. Once he accepts his inclusion in the group he is ready to be given his boon, the gift for his people that ends the hero's quest.

When Milkman meets the guide for his heroic quest, Pilate, she begins their conversation by Signifying:

'Hi.'
The woman looked up. First at Guitar and
then at Milkman.

'What kind of word is that?' Her voice was light but gravel-sprinkled. Milkman kept on staring at her fingers, manipulating the orange, Guitar grinned and shrugged. 'It means hello.'

'Then say what you mean.'

'Okay. Hello.'

'That's better. What you want?'

'Nothin. We just passin by.'

'Look like you standin by....'

'We wanna ask you something.' Guitar stopped feigning indifference. She was too direct, and to keep up with her he had to pay careful attention to his language (36-37).

Pilate is, through Signification, both demonstrating that she is part of the community and teaching Milkman and Guitar the rules of discourse that are acceptable in their community. Guitar is cognizant of the lesson he is being taught: he knew that “to keep up with her he had to pay careful attention to his language” (37). Milkman is unaware; when Pilate asks who is Guitar's friend, Milkman must be prompted to talk and then he says the wrong thing: "Hi" (37). Milkman had not paid close enough attention to the previous conversation to realize that "Hi" was not an acceptable term. Milkman is not part of the community yet, but the community has not given up on him because members of the community continue to try to engage him in acts of Signification.

Guitar is part of the community. He comes from a family that Signifies, so the foundation was laid for his communal conduct. Guitar's grandmother, Mrs. Bains,
Signifies in the presence of Guitar, on Milkman's father, Macon. Macon not only does not participate in the act of Signification, but in fact he is so outside of his community that he does not recognize Signifying. When Mrs. Bains comes to Macon to ask for an extension on paying her rent because she does not have enough money for both food and rent, Macon refuses her request:

'. . .babies can't make it with nothing to put in they stomach."

Their voices were low, polite, without any hint of conflict.

'Can they make it in the street, Mrs. Bains? That's where they gonna be if you don't figure out some way to get me my money.'

'No, sir. They can't make it in the street. We need both, I reckon. Same as yours. . . .'

If she had been younger and has more juice, the glitter in her eyes would have washed down her cheeks. . . .

'What's it gonna profit you, Mr. Dead, sir, to put me and them children out?' (21-22).

Outside, when her grandchildren ask her what had happened she says, "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible thing to see." The boys looked at each other and back at their grandmother. Their lips parted as though they had heard something important" (22).

Mrs. Bains' Signification begins with a subtle reminder that her grandchildren are like any children, including Macon Dead's: "We need both, I reckon. Same as yours. . . .". When Macon does not respond to her
reminder, the Signifying becomes more serious. First she censures Macon with a biblical phrase, "What's it gonna profit you..." taken from Matthew 16:26, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" This passage is about greed—having too much, wanting too much—and the things people are willing to do to achieve and secure their wants. Macon, in his quest for success and prestige, has sold his soul, and Mrs. Bains is calling him on it.

Then she continues in an even more serious vein: "A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see." This is not a racial slur; Mrs. Bains is using the word "nigger" to mean grudging and petty in giving, stingy, meanly small. This indictment is most severe because Mrs. Bains as an African American is very aware of how the word nigger has been used to stereotype, hurt, humiliate and dehumanize African Americans. The fact that she used this word, in front of her grandchildren, to describe Macon Dead is an indication of the seriousness of her Signification and an indication of how far Macon Dead is outside of the community.

Underlying this whole Signification is Mrs. Bains' use of the word "sir." In the five sentences she speaks to Macon, she refers to him as "sir" or "Mr. Dead, sir" four times. In African American culture the proper
conduct would have been for Macon Dead to defer to Mrs. Bains, because she is an older woman. Mrs. Bains, by her repeated use of “sir,” and her pretense of deference, is calling forth the Aunt Jemima image of the slave speaking to the slaverholder, which connotes layers of meaning: disrespect, masking, resistance, hatred, deference, and shame. Invoking the image of Aunt Jemima is dangerous and serious: the danger makes it serious. Using the mask of Aunt Jemima is dangerous because of the painful associations connected with the reasons for her existence. Those who invoke Aunt Jemima must be very secure in their place in their community and within themselves because there is a chance that they could be mistaken for a real Aunt Jemima, a person who has bought into the myth of White supremacy. The other danger is that Aunt Jemima will become her reality.²

The establishment of Mrs. Bains and her grandson, Guitar, as members of the community is important because they in turn become the indicators of who is not in the community. The rhetorical value of this scene is very powerful: before this conversation the reader knows that Macon was not peaceful, that he was “Solid, rumbling, likely to erupt without prior notice. . . .,” that he used fear to control his family, and that he hated his wife, but the reader does not know he is a lost soul (11).
Macon Dead, by not recognizing his breaches of communal protocol in his conversation with Pilate and Mrs. Bains, demonstrates to the characters in the story and the reader that he is outside the community. When Mrs. Bains Signifies with her grandchildren and they respond, and when Pilate Signifies on Macon, it is a reinforcement of their group participation and further demonstrates, to the reader, their position as indicators of inclusion and exclusion.

Macon Dead is given numerous opportunities to participate in the act of Signification but he never does. Macon was at one time part of his community...when he was just starting out in the business of buying houses, he would lounge around the barbershop and swap stories with the men there. But for years he hadn’t had that kind of time, or interest” (52). Macon has sold his soul for profit.

In Morrison’s novels, those who are outside their community are fragmented and can only be made whole through communal, historic memory and participation. Morrison’s most extreme novel of fragmentation is *Tar Baby* which has its basis the Signifying, trickster tale of the same name. In *Tar Baby*, Jadine is a young, beautiful African American woman who has lost and/or given up her sense of community. Jadine is fragmented because she refuses to choose an identity. Son is a
beautiful African American man who has an idealistic memory of his childhood home. He is fragmented because he is blinded by the ideal and so he can not see the truth.

According to Barbara Hill Rigney, "Son is dispossessed, permanently 'out-of-town,' his name being his only connection with community and black tradition" (43). But Son is part of his community because of the connections implied by his name and because he does practice the discourse of his community. He Signifies on Sydney and Ondine when he becomes Uncle Tom and tries to talk his way into their good graces: ". . . he kept calling him Mr. Childs and sir and allowing in gesture as how he was a reprobate, and ended by asking them both if they knew some where else he could sleep. . . . Outside if need be, he said, It would just be for one more night. . . " (140).

But Son, like Jadine, is at a crossroads; both have reached a critical point and now must decide which way to turn. Jadine and Son are searching for their roots. Jadine never finds hers because she is not willing or is unable to find the fortitude to struggle, to choose her African American culture. In the end, Son does find his place as he runs toward it "Lickety-split. Lickety-lickety-lickety split" (264).\(^5\)

Once again Morrison uses Signifying to demonstrate
the division of group from other. Son Signifies, Jadine does not. Jadine is uncomfortable with her African American heritage; in fact, the only time Jadine speaks in Black English is when she is under duress: "You rape me and they'll feed you to the alligators. Count on it, nigger. You good as dead right now" (103). Son, on the other hand, is comfortable with his African American-ness. He Signifies on Jadine, but she does not respond: when she asks his name, Son responds by Signifying: "What do you like? Billy? Paul? What about Rastus?" (99). The name Rastus has historical meaning in the African American community, being the name used for a foolish buffoon, or Uncle Tom, an image that helped to establish the stereotype of the African American's inferiority. By envoking this name, Son is Signifying on Jadine’s Uncle Tom-ness and is reminding her that he knows who and what she is even if she is confused. He is also reminding her that he, unlike her, is proud and happy to be an African American.

Jadine appears not to recognize that she has been Signified on and does not reply. Once again Morrison uses Signification to show separation, and she uses implication within the Signification to leave gaps for the reader to fill; such as the lack of an explanation of the name Rastus. In the process of filling the gap, the reader participates in the Signification, and a
separation is created between those who participate and those who do not. Community membership is demonstrated through active communal participation.

In Morrison's Beloved, the Signifying starts before the story begins. Before the epigraph, centered on a blank page are the words "Sixty Million and more." This number refers to the number of Africans killed because of the peculiar institution of slavery. This "Sixty Million and more" is placed on the page without explanation or footnote. For those who are aware of African American history, this number jumps off the page and wails its pain, horror, anger, fear, joy, sadness, triumph and unbearable loss. For those who are aware of African American history, this number needs no explanation; it is implicitly explicit.

"Sixty Million and more" also carries with it an implied censure: it indirectly asks the questions, When was the last time you remembered, or acknowledged those who came before you? What have you done to validate and honor those who died in slavery? Morrison wants us to "Remember something [we] had forgotten [we] knew" (Beloved 61). Indirectly, Morrison is setting the stage and the mood for her story, a story about slavery and remembering.

On the page after "Sixty Million and more" is the epigraph of the story:
I will call them my people
which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.
Romans 9:25

The beloved in the epigraph is a Signification on the
title of the story and on the character Beloved. At
first, the reader is not aware of the connection between
the epigraph and the child, Beloved. Sethe's child is
not mentioned until page 5, and then only indirectly:

She had not thought to ask him and it bothered
her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she
could have had the whole thing, every word she
heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all
there was to say, surely) engraved on her
baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved (5).

The indirectness is two-fold: first Beloved is not
directly named here, and second this passage is at the
end of a section that is so emotionally upsetting and
fraught with paranormal activity that the reader may not
have recovered enough to realize the importance of
"Dearly Beloved." Layered under this indirectness is the
play on the word beloved: "be loved" as in to be loved,
referring to someone waiting, at an impasse,
"Disrememembered and unaccounted for," until someone else
decides to love them, someone else decides if they are
worthy of and for love. The paradoxical ambiguity of
the biblical passage itself sets up another layer. Who
is the "I" of Romans 9:25? Who are the "people"? Does
this biblical passage connect with Morrison's story?
As an added twist Beloved is also a part of this Signification (Beloved 274). Beloved is a ghost, a child, a succubus, and the spirits of the Africans who lost their lives during the Middle Passage, while at the same time she is the mirror of the beloved of the biblical passage. The layers of meaning allow for more readers to understand more of the significance of this epigraph. They also create more gaps for the readers to fill, and the more the readers participate in establishing meaning the more involved they become with the characters and story.

These Signifying acts are directed at the reader by the text. The text is Signifying on the reader. The juxtaposition of the “Sixty Million and more,” the epigraph, and the multiple Beloveds is telling the reader to read carefully; to remember the Sixty Million and more; to remember the “beloved, which was not beloved,” to remember and temper that remembrance with mercy.

Readers who are familiar with Morrison's work will be aware that each word, each nuance of a word, is important and significant. This causes the reader to be language aware. The reader becomes part of a group who knows that language is important in Morrison's works. Using the oral tradition as the foundation of the written text also signals the aware reader that this
story is in the vein of the African American storyteller: the story and meanings within the story will be indirect and the reader must actively participate to discover the meaning of the story. By beginning this story with an act of Signification, Morrison is also opening the door for the aware reader to become a member of the community within the story. Morrison uses Signifying to define those who are a part of and those who are outside the community.

In Jazz, Morrison takes Signifying into a different arena in which the narrator is Signifying on the reader. The narrator of Jazz is a trickster. She tells the reader at the beginning of the story that she is unreliable and then proceeds to tell the story as if she has all knowledge and information necessary for understanding. She is telling the reader to be careful here; all is not as it seems. And if, like the farmer in the story of the snake, readers are shocked and dismayed when the narrator is “exposed” at the end of the story—“I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am”—they did not recognize the narrator’s Signifying nature, they did not bond with the community and they learned a lesson: be aware of the trickster (161).

The trickster nature of the narrator is not hidden. She begins her story by giving the reader details of
what Violet had done and why, and then she says, "the snow she [Violet] ran through was so windswept she left no footprints in it, so for a time nobody knew exactly" including the narrator (4). She repeatedly tells the reader that she is a trickster, that she does not know everything, that she is telling the reader what she thinks she knows. She says, "Whether she sent the boyfriend away or whether he quit her, I can't say" (5), and even more explicitly she says, "I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am" (160).

The narrator Signifies with the reader when she says, "...the band the girl liked best (Slim Bates' Ebony Keys which is pretty good except for his vocalist who must be his woman since why else would he let her insult his band)" (5). The narrator Signifies on Dorcus, "I always knew that girl was a pack of lies. I could tell by her walk her underclothes were beyond her years even if her dress wasn't" (72). When she Signifies on Dorcus, she is speaking directly to the reader, actively including the reader in a communal ritual.

One of the reasons the Signifying of this narrator is so powerful is because of Morrison's evocation of the oral tradition: the narrator sounds like she is talking to the reader. By her style, as in "Sth, I know that woman," she also reminds readers who are aware of the
Black English oral tradition of numerous other storytellers who have lived in the African American community. She "puts you in the mind of" the oral tradition. This narrator is a full-fledged member of the community and she is Signifying with and on the reader.

By the end of the book the reader has been made so comfortable with the orality of the narration that when the narrator begins to express her love for the reader; the reader is comfortable enough to listen, listen to the narrator's voice as she stops telling the story of Violet and Joe and begins her own story. The narrator's declaration of love is directed at the reader: "That I have loved only you, surrendered my whole self reckless to you and nobody else, That I want you to love me back . . . . That I love the way you hold me, how close you let me be to you" (229).

Signifying, like other aspects of African American culture and language, is complex and sophisticated. It is not just a single autonomous thing; rather, there are connections, layers, and angles that are part of the whole. It is a synthesis of a number of other concepts. Other layers of Signifying are the rhetorical tropes of Call/Response and Witness/Testify.
1. Another character from fiction that is like Pecola, "an absences in the midst of activity" is Janie's Grandmother, Nanny, in There Eyes Were Watching God.

2. The danger of Aunt Jemima is repeated in Morrison's stories. Mrs. Breedlove in The Bluest Eye evolves into an Aunt Jemima. Helen Wright in Sula becomes Aunt Jemima when she ventures into the white world. Pilate in Song of Solomon uses the mask of Aunt Jemima, and Guitar mistakenly thinks her mask is real. In Tar Baby, Son becomes the male equivalent of Aunt Jemima, an Uncle Tom, when he tries to fool Valerian; Ondine and Sydney are Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom respectively. Jadine is caught in the border between Aunt Jemima and self love. The Aunt Jemima in Jazz, Alice Manfred, has evolved into a complicated creature who is more than and less than her Aunt Jemima predecessors.


4. According to Barbara Hill Rigney, "Son is a son of Africa and also a son of the American black male experience, the 'Nigger Jims... Staggerlees and John Henry's'" (43).

5. This is the traditional ending for the "Tar Baby" story. Son, like Rabbit, has chosen what may appear to be the wrong choice, but in the reality of Son and Rabbit, they have chosen home. Keith Byerman contends that "He [Son] does not go back to the womb, as Jadine thought, but into the domain of the true black man" (84).

6. The complete verse 25 reads, "As he saith also in O-see, I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved." Verse 26 reads, "And It shall come to pass that in the place where it was said unto them, ye are not my people; there shall they be called the children of the living God." O-see, also called Hosea, is a prophet who was God's spokesperson during Israel's darkest hours. The "he" of Romans 9:25 is God, "she" refers to the Gentiles, and the "also" refers to Hosea.
1:9 and 10 which says, "Then said God, Call his name Lo-am-mi: for ye are not my people, and I will not be your God. Yet the number of the children of Israel shall be as the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured nor numbered; and it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living God."

Morrison's Beloved mirrors the Biblical Beloved. The narrator of Beloved is like to prophet who tells the story of a people who experience loss and triumph. The diaspora of the African slave and later African Americans mirrors the dispersion of the Gentiles. The lack of mercy God seems to have for the Gentiles of these Biblical passages is mirrored in the lack of mercy show for Morrison's Beloved. Like Hosea 1:10, "... it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them, Ye are not my people, there it shall be said unto them, Ye are the sons of the living god" there is hope that one day Beloved's family, Sethe and Denver, as well as the African American community, will be vindicated.

7. It could be argued that the author is responsible for these acts of Signification, but I am more interested in Signifying than in the argument of who is telling the story, the author or the narrator.

8. I am referring to the narrator as a female because in Beloved Morrison says "When he got to the steps, the voices drained suddenly to less than a whisper. It gave him pause. They had become an occasional mutter—like the interior sounds a woman makes when she believes she is alone and unobserved at her work: a sth. . . ." (172). The narrator of Jazz begins her tale with, "Sth I know that woman."
Like Signifying, Call/Response and Witness/Testify are also prominent features of the Black English oral tradition. They are communal and individual expressive modes grounded in the cyclic, inclusive, group-oriented, traditional African world view. Call/Response is, as Smitherman says, "stating and counter stating; acting and reacting" (Talkin 119). It is "spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between speaker and listener in which all of the speaker's statements ("calls") are punctuated by expressions ("responses") from the listener" (Talkin 104).

Call/Response is collaborative improvisation that, is a characterization of common content and shared experience. Call/Response is also an outward expression of group; it indicates a connection, a shared history and culture. It unifies the listener and the speaker. Response also allows the Caller to know that the audience approves of what they are saying and/or how they are saying it; it is immediate validation: "The process requires that one must give if one is to receive, and receiving is actively acknowledging another" (Talkin 108). Men, women, and children use Call/Response as a process of communication. As with Signifying, Call/Response can be verbal and non-verbal.
Call/Response is almost always triggered through emotions, a need to make an emotional connection. Call/Response is directed by an individual, the Call, for the specific purpose of eliciting a Response. The reason the Response is given is because the Call generates an emotional summons that demands a reaction. In music the Response began as a repetition of the Call. In conversation, the Responder improvises, and the response is not a mirroring, but an emotional echo of the Call. The Responder does not usually parrot the exact words of the Call, but the Response carries the emotional elements of the Call. The Response refigures the Call. The emotional and verbal connections created by the Call/Response act are one of the elements that has allowed communal and emotional survival of African American culture. The Caller and the Responder have to have a shared history or background in order to make an emotional connection.

Call/Response, like Signifying, relies heavily on implicature. The Call and the Response may not seem to be directly connected, because the connection is made through communal history and knowledge. In Call/Response those who are not part of the community may not feel or hear the Call. Some Calls, especially those used in the African American church, are standards that are used to make a connection. The speaker Calls to the congregation, "You don't know what I'm talking about...," "Given Honor to
God, who is the head of our lives..." "Can I get a Witness?" or, one of the most well known, "He woke me up early this morning...

Sometimes the speaker in an African American church or someone whose oral training comes from an African American church background Calls to her/his audience by imparting some of the information needed to make meaning or he or she may recite part of a quotation. The audience, in an act of a ritualized Response, completes the quote or finishes imparting the information. For example, if the speaker in an African American church says, "Go ye into all the world..." the audience would respond with "and teach the Gospel."

The speaker may use the lyrics of songs. In the church, gospel or spirituals are used, and in the secular arena, gospel, spirituals, blues, jazz, rock and roll are used—whatever it takes to make a connection and elicit a Response. The speaker may say, "I love the Lord, he heard my cry...", and the audience may Respond with the appropriate ending, "and pitied my every groan..." The speaker may say, "Father, I stretch my hand to thee..." and the audience's response would be, "no other help I know..." The use of song lyrics is a many-layered act of Call/Response. The audience is Responding to the speaker's Call, and the musicians and choir also join in this Call/Response act. They can both Call and Respond in song
or music by singing or playing the song from which the
speaker has taken the lyric or another song that amplifies
the message the speaker is imparting.

The song from which the speaker takes the lyrics also
layers the meaning of the Call/Response act because there
are certain songs that are reserved for special occasions,
such as funerals, weddings, songs of comfort, songs of joy,
songs of renewal and hope sung during the Easter holidays,
and songs sung by and/or for children. A speaker, with
communal knowledge can enrich his message by choosing a
song that through its association with a specific event
brings layerings of meaning and Responses. If the speaker
says "I'm pressing on. . .," he/she invokes the verbal
Response from the audience of "the upward way. . .," but
the speaker is also bringing into the Call/Response event
the memory of those who sang this song as a banner and a
reminder of the oppression of slavery, of all those who
lived, fought and died so that the listener could have an
opportunity to have a better life.

Reverend Jessie Jackson's famous "I am somebody" speech
is an act of Call/Response. He Calls the audience--"I am. .
."--and the audience responds--"somebody. . . ." Because it
is so well known, Doctor Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have A
Dream" speech has become a ritualized act of Call/Response.
A speaker can Call to the audience with "I have a dream. .
." and the audience will respond "that one day. . . ."
There are also standard Responses that have specific functions such as "Amen" to signal agreement with the speaker and "Tell it" and "Watch yourself now" to indicate encouragement. There are Responses that tell the speaker that he/she is on the right track but has not quite arrived yet: "Take your time," "Come on with it." There are also universal signals given as Responses, such as the head bowed and the hand(s) raised, and standard sounds such as "ummm hummm hummm." The meaning of the sound is defined by who makes the sound and by the tone, tempo, site, and situation where the Response is given. In a sermon the preacher might say, "You don't know what I'm talking about," to the congregation. The congregation would then reply with a phrase that would convey to the preacher and the rest of the audience how they felt about what the preacher had to say and how he was saying it.

Smitherman gives some examples of verbal Call/Responses:

Church

Preacher ("caller"): My theme for today is Waiting on the Lord.

Congregation ("responders" all speaking simultaneously): Take yo' time. Fit it up, Reb! Preach it, Reb!

Barbershop
Male 'caller': I done put my money on Clay.

Male 'responders' (all talking at the same time): Ali, nigger. Doan make no difference what you call him, he still the same.

Well, the bookies say--
Fuck them, they white, they don't know they ass from a hole in the ground!

He ain't finished yet.
Frazier doan stan a chance.
(Talking 104-105).

The connections between the Caller and the Responder are made through a form of implicature. The Caller and the Responder fill in the gaps between the Call and the Response with mutual understanding, mutual knowledge, and mutual communal methods of communication. There must be a collective knowledge between participants for Call/Response. Implicature allows more than one voice to be heard. The speaker and the audience become like a chorus, a symbolic and actual configuration that is unified but allows individuals independent modes of expression within a communal act, and a freedom to participate.

Call/Response in the oral tradition was and is
immediate and calls for a close, intimate association between the speaker and the audience. It encourages a collaboration between the Caller and the Responder: there is no temporal or physical distance between the audience and the Caller. As the speaker/singer/musician is Calling to the audience, the audience is Responding. In the African American community, this back and forth exchange is essential and appropriate communal behavior. Silence in conversation is considered to be rude; either the speaker is not up to standard or the listener is not paying attention, but either way, not responding to the speaker signals a negative response, a lack of connection.

Call/Response in the oral tradition has many forms. In old work songs, such as those sung by African Americans working on the railroad, the song was the Call and the Response was the action that took place:

A gang of Louisiana railroad workers, dragging out old wooden crossties and putting new one under the rails, tugged at the new crosstie at the end of each line of their leader's song:

   Come on cross tie--(umph)
   Git yo' place--(umph)
   Train be comin--(umph)
   By-an'-by--(umph)
   lay down easy--(umph)....

The antiphony in these songs consisted of the words of the lead singer and the grunts of the workers or the sounds of their tools (Levine 209).
Zora Neale Hurston uses a Call/Response song in There Eyes Were Watching God to demonstrate solidarity and joy:

When it got good to everybody, Muck-Boy woke up and began to chant with the rhythm and everybody bore down on the last word of the line:

Yo' mama don't wear no Draws
Ah seen her when she took 'em Off
She soaked 'em in alcohól
She sold 'em tuh de Sany Claus
He told her 'twas against de Law
To wear dem dirty Draws (149).

No one tells the participant what to do or how to proceed; Muck-Boy begins and the others join in. The participants share communal knowledge of the rituals and proper conduct of their culture. There is no need to discuss who will begin, when to join in, what to sing, or when to quit.

Call/Response is included in all aspects of African American culture including writing. Langston Hughes' "Ask Your Momma" is a twelve-part, Signifying poem in which "Ask Your Momma" is the Response to the call of the twelve stanzas. Call/Response is also a mainstay of African American churches as Smitherman has demonstrated. It is present in African American music:

The overriding antiphonal structure of the spirituals—the call and response pattern which Negroes brought with them from Africa and which was reinforced in American... placed the individual in continual dialogue with his community, allowing him at one and
the same time to preserve his voice as a distinct entity and to blend it with those of his fellows (Levine 33).

Any musical group that is composed of a lead singer/musician (Caller) and background singers/player (Responders) characteristically follows the antiphonal pattern of Call/Response.

In contemporary music, a musician might Call using his voice and Respond to his own Call with an instrument. In Otis Rush’s “Everyday I have the Blues,” he begins with a guitar Calling out the melody and Responds by singing “Everyday I have the blues...” which becomes the refrain. As the song progresses, Rush alternates the Call and Response of his guitar and voice, or as Smitherman says, the musician “may begin with a plaintive wail on the piano and respond with his harmonic, building until he achieves a plateau of exaltation, that is, balance and harmony” (Talkin 113)

Call/Response takes place in individual conversations between African Americans. During conversation, the speaker’s articulations are punctuated by Responses from the listener(s). The Responses can be verbal and non-verbal gestures, facial expressions or sounds. Those outside of the African American culture may perceive these Responses as interruptions, but in fact they are facilitators for further discourse.

In written discourse, the Call/Response event
becomes distant, both temporally and physically. The storyteller and the reader do not share an immediacy of response and reaction. Written discourse does not accommodate the spontaneity or synchronicity of Call/Response. Call/Response has survived the transition between oral to written because it allows African Americans to achieve a state of balance and harmony which is part of the traditional African world view: "...the traditional African world view conceptualizes a cosmos which is an interacting, interdependent, balanced force field. The community of men and women, the organization of society itself, is thus based on this assumption" (Talkin 108).

John F. Callahan traces the changes in Call/Response from its evolution in African American oral tradition:

Alert to the participatory quality of oral storytelling, black writers imbue their fiction with the improvisatory energy and testamental ritual of the oral tradition. In their hands call-response evolves into a resilient literary device that persuades readers to become symbolic and then perhaps actual participants in the task of image-making, of storytelling. As a narrative technique adapted from the forms of music and storytelling, call-response opens up a potential relationship between writer and reader analogous to the human situation that exists between performers and their audience (17).

According to Gayl Jones,

In the literary text both dialogue and plot
structure may demonstrate this call-and-
response pattern: one scene may serve as a 
commentary on a previous scene while a later 
scene becomes a commentary or response to that 
one. In Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man, for 
example, the prologue might be read as 
containing numerous 'calls' to which the 
episodes are various 'responses.' (197).

Toni Morrison's texts Call to each other: The 
Bluest Eye's coming-of-age tale is extended and 
continues in Sula. It could be said that The Bluest Eye 
Calls and Sula Responds. Guitar in Song of Solomon 
Calls and Son in Tar Baby Responds; Sethe in Beloved 
Calls and Violet in Jazz Responds. Within Morrison's 
stories, characters Call and Respond to each other: Sula 
and Nel in dreams; Pilate and Reba in song; Wild, Joe 
Trace, Golden Grey, and Henry LesTroy in spirit; and 
Cholly, Beloved, and Sula, Call and Respond to their 
wildness. The women's conversation in The Bluest Eye is 
described as

a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, 
curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another 
sound enters but is upstaged by still another: 
the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes 
their words move in lofty spirals; other times 
they take strident leaps, and all of it 
punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like the 
throb of a heart made of jelly (16).

This passage is a Call to Claudia and Frieda and to the 
reader to listen closely and remember other times and 
places where "conversation [was] like a gently wicked 
dance."

Morrison tries to capture the simultaneous exchange
of Call/Response in *Jazz* when Joe Trace goes to Alice Manfred's club meeting: "they laughed, tapped the tablecloth with their fingertips and began to tease, berate and adore him all at once. They told him how tall men like him made them feel, complained about his lateness and insolence, asked him what else he had in his case. . ." (70). Morrison, by listing the movements, sounds and verbal exchanges without stopping for details, is metaphorically imitating the ritual of Call/Response from the oral tradition and allowing the reader to fill in any blank spaces with necessary information.

Morrison combines the traditional form of Call/Response taken from African American music with the emotional Call/Response of the Black Church to invite and encourage the reader to Respond to her stories. In *Song of Solomon*, there are layers of Call/Response when Macon sits outside of Pilate's house listening to the women inside singing. Their song is a Call and Response: "Macon walked on, resisting as best he could the sound of the voices that followed him" (28). Pilate, Reba, and Hagar are Calling and Responding to each other and their song is Calling for Macon to Respond:

They were singing some melody that Pilate was leading. A phrase that the other two were
taking up and building on. Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano in counterpoint, and the soft voice of the girl, Hagar... pulled him like a carpet tack under the influence of a magnet(29).

This passage is also calling to the reader to respond through memory of women like these three, who have sung the songs that accompanied their lives. It pulls the reader, just as it pulls Macon. It also calls the reader to empathize with Macon's isolation, loneliness, and inability to participate.

"Her powerful contralto, Reba's piercing soprano" is also a Call/Response act an improvisation of previous songs and singers. In The Bluest Eye, Claudia's mother, like Pilate and Reba, sings "misery colored by greens and blues" that "took all of the grief out the words and left [Claudia] with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet" (24). The women in Beloved also lift their voices,

as though the Clearing had come to her [Sethe] with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it... (261).

Milkman only sings one song and that is for Pilate:

'Sing,' she said. 'Sing a little somethin for me.'

Milkman knew no songs, and had no singing voice that anybody would want to hear, but he couldn't ignore the urgency in her voice. Speaking the words without the last bit of a tune, he dang for the lady. 'Sugargirl don't
The songs and the event of singing, for these characters, are acts of Call/Response. Pilate and Reba sing a Call/Response song that Calls to Macon and the reader, and Claudia's mother's song is a Call to Claudia that makes pain endurable. The women's song in Beloved Calls to Sethe to let go of Beloved, let go of the past and her independence and come to them, be with them, rejoin the community. And Pilate Calls to Milkman to sing, while the song he sings is a Call from his ancestors, a transmission of history, which in turn Calls to the reader to Respond.

Call/Response in written discourse includes responses to physical Calls and emotional Calls which, through historical and communal knowledge, evoke a Response from the reader and the characters of the story. In a physical Call, one is actually Called on to Respond, as in Jazz when the women Call to each other in Song: "Like the voices of the women in houses nearby singing 'Go down, go down, way down in Egypt land...' Answering each other from yard to yard with a verse or its variation" (226). There are layers of physical Calls and Responses in this quote. The singing women are Calling and Responding to each other in song, and "Go Down Moses" is an antiphonal song. The narrator, by
telling the reader about the women's song is also
Calling on the reader to Respond to their communal
singing.

Emotional Calls pull at the emotions of the reader,
drawing the reader to Respond. In The Bluest Eye,
Claudia says "There is really nothing to say—except
why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must
take refuge in how" (9). This is an emotional Call to
the reader to Respond with empathy and grace, and it is
an effective Call because most people have experienced
the difficulty of why in their lives. It makes an
emotional connection. In Sula, Nel's discovery of her
mother's fallibility on the train trip to visit Nel's
grandmother is a Call to readers to Respond, to remember
their own feelings during their rite of passage. In
Morrison's dedication of Beloved, part of the power of
its Signification is because it Calls forth an emotional
Response from the reader who has cultural, historical
and personal knowledge of the "Sixty Million and more."

Call/Response also helps to lessen the distancing
nature of written discourse. It unifies the community
of characters in the novel and allows the reader to make
connections with them. John Callahan writes, "Because
they are close to an oral culture. . . black writers
bring a dimension of immediacy to the struggle with the
written word. They adapt call-and-response to fiction
from the participatory forms of oral culture" (14).

African American writers have combined the rhetoric of Call/Response with Witness/Testify, another part of the word-of-mouth facet of the African American community. Callahan states,

In the African-American grain, stories were told in unceasing collaboration between the storyteller and his audience, the black community. Call-and-response was so fundamental to the form and meaning of the tales that anyone, black or white, allowed into the circle was bound to become a participant as well as a witness (27).

Witness/Testify, like Signifying and Call/Response, uses the act of communication as a metaphor for the unity expressed in the traditional African world view. Witness/Testify is a testament, tangible proof that symbolizes or serves as evidence to validate one's existence as part of the group. To Witness is to affirm, attest, certify, validate, and observe. In the oral tradition Witness and Testify go hand in hand; one who Witnesses has an obligation to Testify. Smitherman defines Testifying as a "concept referring to a ritualized form of black communication in which the speaker gives verbal witness to the efficacy, truth, and power of some experience in which all blacks have shared" (Talkin 58).

Witness/Testify is a shared collective memory, a cultural ritual that promotes solidarity and cohesion.
If someone else knew, shared, and identified, or if the story was told and retold, the incident, the participants, and the history were kept alive. The more people who Witnessed and told, the more likely the survival of the memory of the event. Witness/Testify was a system that helped to fill in gaps--social, historic, and communal gaps caused by the censorship of the dominant culture. It was and is a repository of memory.

Until recently, for the most part, the history, language and social interactions of African Americans were denied, ignored and/or erased by the dominant culture. African Americans, through Witness/Testify and validation of the oral tradition, created a living archive of African American culture. Those who Witnessed told, making those who heard them Witnesses who in turn Testify, and so gaps were filled and losses regained through a system that reaffirms the community.

To Witness one does not have to have seen or been present at a particular incident; one must simply have shared a similar experience, seen a similar incident, heard a similar story. Witnessing is shared experience. Emotional, physical, communal, historical, it is social empathy. Testifying articulates and validates the shared experience through gesture, sign, symbol, or verbal expression.
There are layers of meaning and function in the act of Witness/Testify. Witness/Testify is personal and collective memory that is focused on the present but framed in the past. When the African American minister Calls out to his congregation, "Can I get a witness?," he/she is not asking if someone in the audience was there when Christ was crucified, he/she is asking—Do you empathize? Do you understand? Has something like this incident touched your life? When the congregation responds verbally, by putting up their hand(s), moaning, and/or nodding their heads, they are Testifying that they are Witnesses, they understand, they have been there, they have personal knowledge of the emotions, pain, loss, anger, fear, joy, excitement of Christ's crucifixion. They are affirming that the group has experienced shared events and emotions. Witness/Testify is group reaffirmation through individual participation while positing an event within a communal gathering which in turn becomes communal knowledge and history.

Witness/Testify is also a way of honoring the person(s) who initiate the event. The person who originates the Witness/Testify act is running the risk of public rejection. If the audience/congregation does not respond, does not validate the shared-ness of the Witness/Testify event, then the initiator is setting her/himself up to be seen as outside, not part of the
group. By responding to the Witness/Testifying event, the participants are demonstrating that they hold the event, the initiator, and the shared-ness in esteem.

Witness/Testify, unlike Call/Response, is individually initiated. Since no one Calls on her/him to participate, each person decides to Witness and or Testify and determines whether or not to enter into the Witness/Testify act. There is a awareness to the act, a willingness to take part. Call/Response is initiated outside of the act: someone purposely Calls in order to get a Response. Witness/Testify is not so deliberate; it is not led or guided, it simple is. Even when a preacher Calls, "Do I have a Witness," the congregation is not obligated to Witness. By not Responding to this Call several Responses are given: I am not a Witness, I chose not to Witness, or I can not Witness.

Call/Response, unlike Witness/Testify, is heavily connected to emotion: emotion is the catalyst that makes the initial contact, the Call, and it is emotion that triggers the Response. While Witness/Testify can be emotionally engaging, it is basically a chronicle, a register of events or emotions that records and pays homage to the event and the participants of the event. According to Natasha Tarpley,

testifying is "...a way to define and redefine one's humanity; to ground oneself in community; to revel in the touch of hands and
bodies familiar with the testifer's pain or joy, in voices that know how to reach her when she is far away and bring her back, making a bridge from this world to the next" (3).

In both the oral tradition and in literature, the participants of Witness/Testifying must "bear witness" to the joys and sorrows of life, and then they must Testify, tell, pass on, share the event with others. Witness/Testify assumes shared experience by the teller and the hearer: it creates and maintains spiritual kinship. Those who Witness have a responsibility to preserve and tell the tale. In written discourse, the reader becomes both symbolic and actual participant in the storytelling event through shared experience, shared emotional response, and connection made by the communal aspect of the event.

Baby Suggs in Beloved leads the Testimony in the meetings at the Clearing. The reader becomes both a Witness, we are allowed to see and hear this Testimony through the written word, and a Testifier, we are Called to Respond. The meeting in the Clearing and the people who participate summon communal memory, the memory of other Testimonies, in store-front churches, on street corners, radio shows, on the phone, with friends and/or family, that make a connection between Baby Suggs, the people in the Clearing, and the reader (87).

In Morrison's Jazz, the reader is a Witness for
Violet, for Joe and for the narrator. The reader is also a Witness to the story that is being told and through discussion of the story the reader Testifies. The narrator of Jazz is participating in the act of Call/Response because she is a reminder, a Call to remember, all those women, both in fiction and in life, who have sat on front porches, on stoops, at windows, and Witnessed the world pass by. This narrator follows a tradition of sentries who Witness and Tell. In fiction, the watchers on the porch in Zora Neal Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and Mrs. Hedges in Ann Perty's The Street are women who piece together their world from the scraps of information they glean from the lives of people around them. Morrison Witnessed these sentries in Hurston's and Petry's stories and she in turn was Called to Respond through Testimony—retelling, rewriting them, bringing them to life in her work. Morrison is mirroring the oral tradition of “passing on” history, stories, cultural mores through Call/Respond and Witness/Testify.

In “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation,” Morrison examines the concept of “passing on,” telling and retelling. She is looking at the role that ancestors play in the texts of African American authors:

[I]t seems to me interesting to evaluate Black
literature on what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor. Which is to say a grandfather as in Ralph Ellison, or a grandmother as in Toni Cade Bambara, or a healer as in Bambara or Henry Dumas. There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom (343).

This "presence of the ancestor(s)" is Call/Response and Witness/Testify. It is what Michael Awkward calls intratextuality. According to Awkward, "[Morrison's] first novel does contain clear evidence of her (sometimes subtle) refigurations of key elements of Baldwin's and Ellison's corpuses" ("'The Evil'" 177). Call/Response, in written discourse, has taken on yet another form, that of Calling from text to text. Morrison has read, Witnessed, the works of other African American authors, ancestors, and she in turn is Called to Respond by Testifying, refiguring, rewriting, retelling them in her novels. The acts of Call/Response and Witness/Testify are a way of including, forming links with the entire community, family, and ancestors: those seen and unseen, known and unknow. It is a way of honoring those who have gone before.

Morrison also uses intratextuality by Calling and Responding, Witnessing and Testifying with her own texts. She retells, rewrites, and reuses concepts,
themes, characters, and phrases from her other works. The pariah and her/his function in the community is a common theme that is repeated in Morrison's work. She has numerous griots in her stories--storytellers, historians, guides, who define reality. The griot is the personification of nommo, the magical power of the word, of language, that creates reality. Lawrence W. Levine defines nommo as, "... ideas and words are seen as part of the same reality as the events to which they refer; words are powerful, often magical parts of the real world" (157).

Some of Morrison's griots are Pilate "... who was believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga..." (Song of Solomon 94); Eva in Sula who holds the power to name, create, and destroy; Therese in Tar Baby who knows the stories and the way of magic, "... she stood at the portable stove burning the hair... burning it carefully and methodically with many glances at [Son] to show she meant him no evil" (129); and Baby Suggs in Beloved who called the people to the clearing (87). All these griots have the power of words, they name people and create reality.

Morrison retells the stories of the pariah and the griot because they hold unique and vital positions in
African American culture. They are important members of the community, even though their action may seem to be contrary to Western norms of society. They hold the community in check. They are living, breathing boundary lines, markers that define the limits of and sanctions within the community. Using Call/Response and Witness/Testify to retell the stories of the pariah and the griot reinforces communal mores, teaches lessons in communal conduct and keeps the history of the African American community thriving.

Morrison also reuses characters in her stories, calling on readers to Respond in Testimony through the Witnessing of the circumstance and lives of these characters. The Suggs family makes its first appearance in Sula, the first who come to the aid of Eva when her husband leaves (32). Mrs. Suggs later returns in Beloved, where she is again the nurturer, the healer of the community, except this time she gives too much and loses all: “Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things?” (137).

Morrison takes Witness/Testify of characters to another level when she reuses characters from works other than her own. In Jazz Violet is described as “awfully skinny, Violet; fifty, but still good looking” (4); dark skinned (83); “wearing coveralls and a
sleeveless faded shirt... her hands deep in the forbidden pleasure of her hair, she noticed she had not removed her heavy work shoes" (225); "Violet's dark girl-body" (226). In Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God Janie is described as, wearing "overhalls," "ole forty year old oman doin wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal"; "The men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swingin to her waist" (2). The similarities between Janie and Violet are not just physical. Both women find love late in life and both women must go on a journey of self discovery before they are able to accept themselves and to give and take love.

Telling and retelling of particular stories make them significant and layer their importance. Violet's story is powerful whether a reader is familiar with Janie or not, but knowledge of Janie enriches the reading of Violet's story. When Morrison Witnesses Janie in and is Called on to Testify about Janie's life in Jazz through Violet, a Response is elicited from the reader.

Similarly, knowledge of the Suggs family in Sula helps to fill in some of the gaps in Beloved. The Sula Suggs were generous, but they did not monopolize the giving; they were part of the community that gave and then stepped back and let Eva and her family handle their own troubles. In Beloved Baby Suggs gave too
much. She monopolized the giving and shut the community out of their opportunity to share in the giving. Morrison refigures these character and makes the reader a Witness to their original story and the retold tale.

Telling and retelling teaches, reminds and reintroduces to the reader correct communal behavior, such as understanding the importance of unique individuals in the community like pariahs and griots. Telling and re-telling also mirrors the oral tradition of storytelling. It allows improvisation and an open-endness to the stories and the storytelling event.

By retelling, rewriting, and reusing concepts, themes, character, and phrases, Morrison is Witnessing and Testifying within her own texts. She Witnesses a character, his/her life or actions, or she Witnesses an event and she Testifies by writing about them. This form of Witness/Testify creates a world, a place, a community of people from the stories she has written that connects with the community of the reader. These codes of conduct and these types of characters Morrison retells and reuses exist outside of Morrison's novels in the community of African Americans.

Events that Morrison incorporates in her stories are part of the history of African Americans: “the 27th Battalion betrayed by the commander,” and “the quiet children of the ones who had escaped from Springfield
Ohio, Springfield Indiana, Greensburg Indiana, Wilmington Delaware, New Orleans Louisiana, after raving whites had foamed all over the lands and the yards of home" (Jazz 33). These historic facts are probably not taught in American history classes, nor are they readily known outside the African American community.

Morrison as a Witness to these historical events, a Witness to these unique characters, a Witness to the mores and values of the African American community must Testify and pass them on so that they will not, can not be forgotten or denied. Morrison's fictional world and the real world of African Americans does the impossible: through acts of Witness/Testify they occupy the same space at the same time.

Morrison also uses music as a form of Call/Response and Witness/Testify to erase boundaries. In Jazz, Morrison makes a connection with the reader through music. The word “jazz” is an act of Call/Response, and Witness/Testify. Jazz music is an African American art form that has its foundation in the music Africans brought with them to America and is a part of blues, hollers, gospel, ragtime, and worksongs of African Americans. Jazz music Calls on the listener to acknowledge the emotions of African American culture. Jazz also acts as a Witness to the history of African Americans, a sort of sound track that accompanies the
historical events of a people. Morrison incorporates the actual music of African Americans in her fictional world just as the African American preacher incorporates sacred music into her/his sermon. At times she names a song or the title of a record: "The Trombone Blues" (Jazz 21). Or she uses a song title or lyrics in the narration or as part of a character's speech to bridge the gap between the text and the reader and between the oral tradition and written discourse. The narrator of Jazz says, "I have seen her, passing a cafe or an uncurtained window when some phrase or other—'Hit me but don't quit me'—drifted out" (59). "Hit me but don't quit me" brings to mind, Calls on the reader to remember, Billy Holiday singing in a small club just down the way, folks dressed up, knowing they had somewhere to go, something to do and see; Harlem in its prime; folks coming up from down home; jobs in factories; children in short pants; rent parties; and hope.

But, just in case you are not a Billy Holiday fan, Morrison gives you a roll call of old blues and jazz lyrics: "... somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beating his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong key hole you got to get bring it and put it right
here, or else" (Jazz, 60). This music calls forth another time and place; it is nostalgia, it is the African American version of "Happy Days." The aware reader responds to this Call through historical and communal memory, that is, through Witness/Testify, a light brush stroke that colors the words of Morrison's story with the feel, smell, taste and sound of Harlem and other African American communities in their heyday. A reminder to remember.

When Morrison begins Sula with "a nigger joke" (4), she is Signifying on the reader who has forgotten the "nigger jokes." She is also Calling on the reader to Witness and Respond through Testimony to "nigger jokes" past, present and future. The "nigger joke" is also a Signification on "the white man who thought he lied when he said that this land was the 'the bottom of heaven" (Rigney 23).

Morrison uses the rhetoric of Call/Response and Witness/Testify to "remember remembering," to bring back a time when the community kept its history in its oral tales, a time when the community did not ask or need any validation from the dominant culture (Beloved 39). Morrison's use of Call/Response and Witness/Testify in this manner is a Signification through which she is censuring the community for forgetting and abandoning their culture in the pursuit of what appears to be
In *Song of Solomon* Morrison examines the consequences of remembrances forgotten. The epigraph of *Song of Solomon* says,

"The fathers may soar
And the children may know their names"

The first line of the epigraph brings to mind the oral stories of the "People Who Could Fly": the Africans who refused to be slaves and lifted up on their own wings and flew home. There are numerous stories of slaves who flew or walked back to Africa both in Africa and in America. The indirect meaning of this phrase may not be understood until the reader makes other connections in the text and becomes part of the community in the text. But even before this phrase is understood, it sets the stage for meaning that coalesces with the opening lines of the novel. First Morrison hints at flight and then she repeats the flying image in the first ten lines of the novel. These first lines are a combination of Signifying, Call/Response and Witness/Testify:

The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at three o'clock. Two days before the event was to take place he tacked a note on the door of his little yellow house:

At 3:00 P.M. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please
forgive me. I love you all.
(Signed) Robert Smith
Ins. agent
(3).

Flying is mentioned twice directly and twice indirectly which allows a number of connections and meanings to be interpreted by the reader. The flying motif and the prophesying tone of the epigraph calls the reader who is aware of African American storytelling to make a connection with Robert Smith's flight and the stories of "The People Who Could Fly." For those outside of the group/community, it is possible to confuse Robert Smith's flight with an airplane flight. Those without communal and historical knowledge would not be aware that it was highly unlikely for an African American to be able to take an airplane flight in 1931.

Morrison uses layers of Signifying, Call/Response and Witness/Testify to engage the broadest group participation. For those aware of African American sacred music, "I will will take off from Mercy and fly away..." is familiar: It calls to mind the song "I'll Fly Away" which is traditionally sung at funerals. This song calls forth memories of death, communal gatherings, loss and joy, a homegoing, and memories of the homegoings the reader has witnessed.

In the African American community when people die, traditionally, they are believed to be passing over,
going home. The life they left behind is only temporary. There is another place to go, a home where they will be welcomed by old friends and family. Also, flight, historically, is associated with freedom and escape.

There is a joking, but serious act of Signification in the line, "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent. . . ". No matter how north you are in Carolina, you are still deep in the South. Also the dichotomy of the juxtaposition of North in conjunction with a very southern state is paradoxical: "North," historically, in the African American community denotes freedom, while "Carolina" is definitely a southern state with all that connotes. There really was a North Carolina Life Insurance company.\(^8\) Communal knowledge of this would make a connection between the reader and the community in the novel, making this act of Signification more compelling.

The paradox becomes more complicated with the injection of Robert Smith as a "Mutual Life Insurance agent." The idea of a company that could insure the life of an African American in the 1930's, and the idea that Robert Smith is the agent, the instrument by which or through which the lives of African Americans could be made sure, certain, or assured, is paradoxically humorous and logically unexpected.
Communal and historical knowledge tells the aware reader that life for African Americans was not insurable in 1931, least of all by another African American. Later in the novel the reader learns that Robert Smith, as a member of the "Seven Days," tries to insure his community through the use of violence and death. Robert Smith is both an agent who sells a contract that guarantees compensation for loss and a person who uses loss, death, as a form of compensation for wrongs committed against his community.

Robert Smith is twice said to be flying "from Mercy . . . ." This is Signifying. This statement is jarring because usually people are taught to go or fly to mercy. The censuring aspect of this Signification is not explained until later in the novel when the reader is told that Mercy is a hospital that shows no mercy to the inhabitants of the African American community within the book (4).

Mercy later in the novel becomes the center of another act of Call/Reponse and Witness/Testify. Robert Smith's mercy is ironic and paradoxical, and later in the novel, Pilate's mercy is full of mercy. One of the most powerful scenes Morrison has written is made so by the ability of Call/Reponse and Witness/Testify to stir the emotions, recall a memory, and unite people: Hagar's funeral in Song of Solomon.
Morrison begins to build the emotional tension with "A female quartet from the Linden Baptist Church had already sung 'Abide with Me'. . ." (316). If the reader has communal and/or cultural knowledge, then this song is likely to be familiar. The first line of the song says:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;
the darkness deepens;
Lord, with me abide! When other helpers fail and comforts flee;
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.
(The Book of Hymns, 289)

This song is based on Luke 24:29:

But they constrained him, saying
Abide with us; for it is toward evening,
and the day is far spent.
And he went in to tarry with them.

This scripture is about the mercy, the comfort, and the knowledge Christ gives to his disciples after he has risen from the dead. Right after this song is when Pilate bursts into the church and shouts, "Mercy!" as though it were a command" (320). Pilate's mercy is also about comfort for the helpless: for her family, for anyone who has lost someone, for her community, and for Hagar. Pilate's mercy is also for the situation that allowed this helpless person to die:

"Mercy?" Now she was asking a question, "Mercy?"
It was not enough. The word needed a bottom, a frame. She straightened up, held her head high, and transformed the plea into a note. In a clear bluebell voice she sang it
out—the one word held so long it became a sentence—and before the last syllable had died in the corners of the room, she was answered in a sweet soprano: 'I hear you' (317).

When Pilate says "Mercy?" she is questioning herself, the people at the funeral, and the reader. This question cuts to the heart of humanity. This is a wail of such pain and sorrow that it becomes more than sound, more than a question: it becomes a unifying point.

The people turned around. Reba has entered and was singing too. [Pilate] simply repeated the word "Mercy," and Reba replied. The daughter standing in the back of the chapel, and the mother up front, they sang.

In the night time.
Mercy
In the Darkness.
Mercy
In the morning.
Mercy
On my knees now.

Pilate and Reba's song becomes a universal cry for mercy. Call/Response is the basis of the song, as the song evokes an emotional response from the listeners. The reader and the characters of the story become Witnesses to Pilate and Reba's Testimony of love and their cry of mercy.

Part of the power of this moment comes from the layering of Call/Response and Witness/Testify. The reader has already witnessed a trio of women—Pilate, Reba, and Hagar—singing a Call/Response song that draws
like a magnet (30). The reader has already Witnessed the lack of Mercy in this time and in this town: "the charity hospital at the northern end [was called] No Mercy Hospital" (4). The layered connections of this Witnessing are compelling and forceful. But this is only one half of the trope, for after Witnessing one must Testify. The characters Testify by retelling this story in their community, the narrator Testifies by telling the story to the reader, and the reader is left with the obligation to Testify. This obligation is an invitation to the reader to become a participant in the discourse of the community.

The rhetorical tropes from the Black English oral tradition bring the rich aural legacy of storytelling, mythmaking, and communal participation to literary texts. Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify help to create a literary form that is able to capture the cultural realities and experiences of African Americans.

1. Smitherman lists some of the verbal and non-verbal Call/Responses that are commonly used in Talkin and Testifyin (106):
2. The traditional Black church is one of the bastions of the Black English oral tradition. In the Black church, Black English is taught, and valued. According to C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya in *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, "The Black church has no challenger as the cultural womb of the black community." (qtd. in Smitherman, Black 32).


4. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. also explores intertextuality in his theory of *Signifying*. Gates conducts a thorough investigation of rhetorical tropes from the oral tradition, but he has mis-named his trope. The systems of persuasion that most closely fit with Gates' hypotheses are the tropes of *Call/Response* and *Witness/Testify*.

5. African American musicians use this same form of *Call/Response*, and *Witness/Testify*. Musicians "sample" each other's work. They refigure, reuse, words, riffs, and styles of other artists. Raps have gone back to the ancestors for bass lines, melodies and styles of songs. Hip Hop groups have sampled extensively from James Brown, Prince has sampled from Jimmy Hendricks, and Arrested Development from Sly and the Family Stone.


7. The second line of this epigraph is ambiguous: is it that the children may know their own names, each other's names, the names of their fathers, or all three? The "may" is also interesting: to be allowed or permitted; to soar and to know their names which implies that the power to fly and know is not in the hands of the fathers or the children. Then there is the "and": ". . . fathers may soar And the children. . . ." Not or, not if, but and; which could mean along with, as well as, or it could mean in consequence or all of the above. Morrison also refers to this story in *Jazz*.
8. According to William Barlow, the "North Carolina Mutual, a black insurance company set up in 1894... went on to become the largest black-owned insurance corporation in the world" (100).
Conclusion

*I want somebody to say amen!*

Toni Morrison

Community, in the African American culture, has been and is defined as a group of people living in the same locale, but it is also people who share common interests, history, fundamental systems of communication and fellowship. Race has also been a factor in the definition of community. Survival meant seeking identity and defining of self through communal bonding. African Americans learned to develop cultural dimensions through self-determination which sequestered and strengthened the mores and ethics of the group. Survival meant isolation and secrecy.

Today the enclaves of African American communities are disappearing. The changing dynamics of America and access to transportation, financial, and educational opportunities have eliminated some of the necessity for seclusion and secrecy. African Americans no longer have to live in a distinctively bound area enclosed within the dominant culture. The ability to live and function outside the enclave has allowed African Americans freedom to prosper, but it has also caused changes to occur within the social and cultural character of the African American community.

African Americans have made great gains, but in the process they also have had to give up some of the survival
traits that allowed them to endure. One of the traits that has begun to change is in the use of Black English. Most African Americans still speak Black English, in one form or another, but Black English is an oral language and has not, in the past, fit comfortably into a written discourse. Authors like Hurston have tried to write Black English, but since it does not have an orthography, the method of representing the sounds of Black English changed from author to author and sometimes from word to word within the same text written by the same author. Sherley Anne Williams has said that "Afro-Americans, having survived by word of mouth—and made of that process a high art—remain at the mercy of literature and writing; often, these have betrayed us" (5).

According to John F. Callahan, "In twentieth-century African-American fiction the pursuit of narrative form often becomes the pursuit of voice. And by voice I mean the writer's attempt to conjure the spoken word into symbolic existence on the page" (14). African American writers looked for a way to embody the printed word with the spoken voice, the diction, the images, and the rhythm of the voice as it leaves the mouth of the speaker and enters the ear of the listener. African American authors have looked for a way to incorporate the eloquent oration of the Black English oral tradition, the understatement, the rhetoric of layered meanings and indirectness, and the
ironic stories filled with metaphor, with the written word. They have looked for a way to use Common English to express the oral tradition of Black English.

Writers began to use Common English as a Mask for Black English. They could write in Common English and still use the rhetoric, meanings, and style of Black English. Masking has allowed Black English to survive the transition from an oral language to written discourse. But the Masking has been so complete that some people are not aware that Common English is the veil that covers the Black English oral tradition. The unaware may believe that the rules, meaning, and definition of Common English are the only elements at work within the written discourse of African Americans.

The secretive and sequestered nature of African American culture, the fact that Black English was not until recently recognized or studied as a language, and the ethnocentric nature of America have contributed to the lack of knowledge about African American culture for those outside the African American community.

The awareness that one language is Masking another and the opportunity for African Americans and White Americans to reach an understanding are possible through a study of literature that encompasses both African American and White American values and systems of language. The rhetorical tropes of Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify
contain the fundamental essence of the traditional African world view that is evident in African American culture. These tropes taken from the Black English oral tradition, combined with the Western tradition of written literature, are tangible evidence of the evolution and amalgamation of African and American cultures into the unique culture of African Americans. Robert B. Stepto contends that "Afro-American literature has developed as much because of the culture's distrust of literacy as because of its abiding faith in it" (309).

The rhetorical tropes of Signifying, Call/Response, and Witness/Testify may also be a forum for a critical theory of African American literature that is based in the traditions of African Americans. There has been much criticism of using critical theories based in Western traditions to evaluate African American literature. Barbara Christian describes present day critical theory as "hegemonic as the world it attacks. . ."(71). Gates questions the validity of African American authors trying to "posit a 'black self' in the very Western languages in which blackness itself is a figure of absence, a negation" (Black 7). Morrison expresses concern about being evaluated through a system that does not include African American values:

I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like in that sense. I do not have objections to being
compared to such extraordinarily gifted and facile writers, but it does leave me sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold on to it (McKay 408).

Morrison's "work bears witness. . ." (LeClair 371) to Joyce and Hardy because they too are writers and Morrison shares with them similarities in themes and forms, but she is also bearing Witness to Hughes, Hurston, and Wright; to the music of African Americans from gospel to jazz; and to those ancestors whose stories are still being told and whose names have been forgotten.

According to Morrison,

An artist, for me, a black artist for me, is not a solitary person who has no responsibility to the community. It's a totally communal experience where I would feel unhappy if there was no controversy or no debate or no anything—no passion that accompanied the experience of the work. I want somebody to say amen! (Davis 418-419).

Signifying, Call/Response and Witness/Testify are repositories of accountability that was and is essential for African American cultural survival. If readers are aware that Signifying, Call/Response and Witness/Testify are systems that are guardians of the words, history, stories, and identity of a people, then they may learn when Called to say Amen as a Testament to a people and a language that has survived slavery, oppression, ignorance,
and intolerance.


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